

Chapter 1 – The Train to Hogwarts

"Aloe*," said someone sounding a great deal like her friend Harry Potter.

"Sell out."

The second voice though, she wasn't entirely sure she could place.

"Okay, fine. Atropine; are you happy now?"

"Belladonna," was the only response.

"Okay, okay. Fine. Calatropin!"

"Dieffenbachia."

"Ooo, have you been practicing?"

"Euphorbia lacteal."

"Maybe I should ask you the same thing," the mostly unknown voice replied.

Tired of guessing, Hermione decided to enter the train carriage and determine the speakers' identities for herself.

What met her eyes was a sight that she was not at all expecting to see.

"Foxglove," Blaise Zabini said with a smirk towards Harry.

"Wimp," Harry threw back, flipping him off as he spoke.

Zabini's presence was completely unexpected. The fact that they were conversing in a friendly banter towards one another was likewise mind blowing, but the true kick in the stomach was the sight of her best friend and how different he seemed after the summer following their 4th year.

"Harry?" She squeaked in surprise.

And therein was the next surprise; he barely spared her a glance before replying back to the Slytherin 5th year sitting across from him.

"Gelsemium sempervirens," he said with a cocky smile.

"A bit far reaching, don't you think?" Blaise asked with a scowl.

Harry just waved his hands at Blaise to get on with it.

"Hemlock," Blaise said with a sniff of distaste.

"Ignatius Beans."

"Jabberknoll parts."

"Wrong category!" Harry said with a growl.

Harry looked quite frightful, actually. It was the growl that made her shiver and take a step back involuntarily.

"Just checking," Blaise said, laughing. "Jalap instead, okay?"

Harry's hair was long and unkempt, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

"Kava kava," was the only reply.

His nose was bent a bit oddly, leading her to wonder how many times it had been broken in the past three months.

"Lovage."

"Melia azedarach."

"Must you always be so difficult?" Blaise asked with a scowl and a barely noticeable roll of his eyes.

And when Harry finally turned and acknowledged her presence, she nearly gasped aloud at the dark red, jagged edged scar running down the left side of his face.

"What happened to you Harry?" She exclaimed.

"Why are you still here?" He replied coldly.

"What are you talking about Harry?"

"Don't you have somewhere more important to be?"

"Like a prefect's meeting perhaps," Blaise offered coolly, looking at her with appraising eyes.

"I – I just wanted to let you know where I'd be," she stammered under the assault of both glaring sets of eyes.

"And abruptly you care," Harry said with a snort.

"Of course I care! Harry, what's wrong? You can tell me!"

"Dumb bint!" Blaise said, standing up with his wand pointed at her.

"Harry! Are you going to let him get away with this?" She exclaimed, looking past the wand in her face.

"Yes," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"Get out, or get hexed. Make your decision," the Slytherin glowered menacingly at her.

"I don't know what's wrong, but I have to go now." She said lamely, backing out of their space quickly.

As she made her way to her meeting, she thought through her actions for the past three months, trying to determine where she had gone wrong.

HSHS

"Stupid bitch," Blaise muttered, after warding their door against other unwanted creatures.

"Gryffindors," Harry spat.

"You going to ask to get resorted?"

"Haven't decided; maybe, but probably not right now."

They both fell silent, thinking about the changes that had occurred for both of them over the past summer.

It had been in the second to last month of school before the summer break that they had begun a tentative—and extremely secret—friendship. Blaise had been walking back to his dorm after an exhaustive library study session when he had heard a sound coming from one of the unused classrooms there in the dungeons.

Naturally inquisitive, yet cautious like most Slytherins, he had decided to investigate only after putting a silencing spell on himself.

What he had found had been one very upset, distraught and overwhelmed Gryffindor by the name of Harry Potter. Blaise had found himself staring in surprise at the other boy for longer than he had intended, who was demolishing what was left of the furniture through sheer physical force.

Harry's hands were bleeding by the time Blaise had walked in, and they had later discovered that he had four broken bones as well.

"What do you want?" Harry had growled out at Blaise, kicking a half mangled chair at him as he spoke.

Blaise had been forced to jump out of the way, but he hadn't retaliated. Instead he had taken a much closer look at the fabled "Gryffindor Golden Boy." The other boy had been very pale and trembling, and there were tear tracks on his cheeks that he wasn't bothering to wipe away, even with knowing that Blaise was in the room.

"Geez, what happened to you Potter?"

"Everything," Harry had replied; throwing a half-hearted punch into the desk that was sitting between them.

"Want me to get someone?" He had whispered; his surprise slowly morphing into worry.

"There's no one to get," Harry had told him with a sharp-eyed look.

And so it had gone. In the end, Blaise had stayed up most of the night with the other boy; a time during which they had talked—just talked. A lot of surprising things had come out for both boys, and in the coming days, their relationship had become one of shared secret pain; the kind of pain that "normal" folks just didn't understand, because they simply lacked the contextual knowledge to understand.

Blaise had suggested going to his head of house for help, but as Harry had pointed out—with no little exaggeration—that Professor Snape would never listen to anything about Harry Potter until he could somehow change the relationship between them. Thus, Blaise had decided to teach Harry everything he knew about potions, in hopes that his new friend could find peace from the dark demons of his past and present that were threatening to do him in.

Blaise's own history was not a pleasant one either, but as much as Blaise despised the people who had hurt him so much, he only felt more so about the people that Harry had been forced to put up with all of his life.

"People think your life is so perfect," he had pointed out one day during the last weeks of school. It was a time in which most of the so-called "champions" were focused on the third task, but for one small Gryffindor boy, he knew that the third task was only a small raindrop in the storm that was about to fall once the school year ended.

"They don't look past their own noses," Harry had replied glumly, while staring silently at the old scars littering the expanse of his hands and arms. As he had explained to Blaise, most of them were defensive scars. "They don't bother to ask, to see what's really going on."

"They don't want to see," Blaise had offered.

"After all," Harry had continued in a much more snide tone, "fuckin' Dumbledore has taken care of everything; so the boy wonder couldn't possibly be safer." The other boy had made an angry face. "I've seen what the Dark Lord does to prisoners, thanks to these damned visions. If I were his prisoner, I would get better treatment than I do at my so-called fucking home," he had said, spitting out the word home with almost as much distaste as Professor Snape did when saying the word, "Potter."

HSHSHS

Blaise focused his mind back on the present and looked at Harry thoughtfully. The other boy certainly did look worse for wear. He was glad that it had only been the Granger girl who had bothered them, and not that walking asshole Weasley boy. He might have been forced to actually commit some acts of violence before they had even gotten to Hogwarts.

He'd had to admit to himself that it wasn't an entirely unpleasant thought.

"You're grinning," Harry pointed out.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Just a little frightening," Harry said with a shrug.

"Can you imagine what it would be like if Professor Snape smiled?"

"His face would probably break," Harry pointed out.

"It'd signify the apocalypse," Blaise said with a snort.

"As one, small children would cry all around the world," Harry said, his expression lightening up a bit at their ridiculous banter.

"That and the Hufflepuffs."

"Probably the Gryffindors would try and laugh, thinking he was agreeing with them," Harry said, smiling a bitter smile at the image.

"How's your article going?" Blaise asked suddenly in an effort to break up the other boy's train of thought.

"Hmm? Oh, it's all right, I suppose. Thanks for those journals you sent with Hedwig, by the way. They revealed some interesting . . . ideas," the smaller boy said with a distant look in his eyes.

Inwardly, Blaise smiled. Harry wasn't writing an article at all, but he was doing research—of a kind. They had decided through multiple correspondences that summer that since the chance at being spied

on or overheard was so high, they needed to develop their own lexicon for discussing their more sensitive topics. Harry's "article" as Blaise had referred to it was actually a reference to Harry's study of their potions master, and what sorts of things it would take to fix the relationship between him and Harry.

Why?

The reasoning was fairly simply really. Professor Snape was the only one who had never fucked Harry over. He had not lied to him either. Certainly it was true that the man's bedside manner left something to be desired, but in the grand scheme of things, their professor's behavior was much preferable in comparison with say, Harry's uncle, or the latest trophy husband of his mother's.

HSHSHS

It had all started with a stray thought about finding some kind of adult that they could both potentially trust with details about their respective home lives. Harry knew that Blaise had only mentioned his head of house because he personally trusted the man; not because he thought the man would actually do anything to help a Gryffindor, especially Harry, if it at all possible. However, the thought had caught root in the desperate soil of Harry's brain during the course of those past horrid months, before ultimately culminating in the beginnings of an actual plot to actually try and enlist the man's help.

Furthermore, the thought had evolved into a quasi-fantasy where he actually was able to live with the man instead of the Dursleys. The thought, while initially somewhat repugnant during the school year, had gain acceptability over the summer as Harry was—forcibly—reminded why he hated the Dursleys so very much.

And he did; he hated them so, so, very much.

Thus the ultimate question arose in his mind: What would his life be like if he lived with Professor Snape instead of his uncle?

Well, for starters, the professor would never starve him. He would never beat him into unconsciousness, or demand lewd acts of payment in return for the basic necessities of life—like the right to use the toilet. Unconsciously, Harry ran his fingers over the small

scars that ran up and down his arms. One particular set was new as of the past summer, and the memories associated with them were almost enough to make his mind shut down in horror.

He wondered if it should bother him more that his mind was retreating from the present more and more, thanks to the recent events of his life. It sickened him to realize that those events, those actions, were nothing more than torture at the hands of his demented muggle relatives. He, a fifteen year old boy, had been tortured by his only living relatives.

And for what?

It was a hatred borne somewhat out of fear; the fear of the unknown, but mostly he was tortured because he was not like them, and because of his parents, he would never be like them.

Not that he wanted to be, anyways, he thought with no small amount of angry resentment.

"Revenge?" Blaise asked him, his voice cutting through his brooding far easier than should have been possible.

"Not before the main course," he answered mildly, playing along with the banter, if not really truly feeling it.

Blaise snorted his response at him, before asking him a question.

"What's first on the menu?"

"Respect."

"What about your friends?"

"They didn't care how I was this summer, even though I've repeatedly tried to emphasize how bad it gets for me. As far as I'm concerned, you are my only friend."

"You're braver than I," Blaise admitted quietly. "Must be that damned Gryffindor mentality coming through."

Harry felt a pained expression constrict his face at the other boy's words.

"I'm not any braver," he argued dully. "Just more desperate."

HS HSHSHSHSHS

Harry climbed down from the train that evening with a glower to equal Professor Snape's. He wasn't going to pretend to like people anymore just to be nice. He wasn't going to play their bullshit games, and he certainly wasn't going to take any flak from anyone about anything that year; well, save for Professor Snape perhaps.

The massive group of people parted before him and as always, whispers followed him as he made his way to the carriages.

"Well well, if it isn't little Potty Potter," drawled a voice to his left. He had spotted Malfoy shortly after exiting and he already had his response ready for the dolt's insults.

"Draco!" He cried out, a large and unstable looking grin on his face.

The motion of bodies around him stopped in their tracks and quickly backed away from them both.

He walked forwards quickly and grabbed the blond haired boy in a near bone crunching hug, maneuvering his "gift" into the other boy's pocket with surprising ease.

"What the fuck!" Draco bit out before pushing him away forcefully.

"I missed you!" Harry said with that same idiotic and worrisome grin still plastered on his face.

"If you ever do that again Potter, I swear you'll be eating with your feet for the rest of your life!" The boy yelled at him, his normally pale cheeks turning pink as the surrounding crowd began giggling nervously.

"Don't tease me with the thought Draco!" Harry warned, before throwing up an invisible shield and walking hastily away. Surprisingly, or not considering his victim was a Slytherin, no attack came, but Harry knew better than to let his guard down.

HS HSHSHSHSHS

After finally arriving at his table in the Great Hall, he sat down at the farthest end from his so-called friends, with his back to the wall. He eyed the other three tables in front of him thoughtfully, while keeping his peripheral vision tuned to the Gryffindor table itself.

The table filled in around him, although few seemed to be willing to actually sit next to him. He realized that Hermione must have said something to Ron, because the boy barely spared him a glance as he headed to sit down at the far end of the long oak table.

He found that he didn't really care all that much. The fewer interactions he had that year equaled less opportunity for being hurt. He looked thoughtfully at the still empty plates sitting around him. It seemed unlikely that he would be able to catch much that first evening back—especially with so many people around him.

His interactions that summer had been limited to very few face to face meetings with actual flesh and blood people. If not for his correspondences with Blaise over the past few months, he likely would have gone mad. He wondered if he should bother telling the other boy what an impact his words had had on him over the last few months.

Knowing Blaise, it was likely that he already knew; Blaise was a Slytherin, and therefore picked up on the smaller details of life—unlike some, he thought with a growl. He knew that he wasn't just stereotyping him because of his house affiliation. Blaise really was aware of the world around him, unlike many of those in the other houses.

Then again, he thought with a small grimace, he's had to learn to keep his eyes and ears open lest unpleasantness occur in that so-called home of his.

Yes, he and Blaise were far more alike than anyone would have ever dared presume. Harry still found it difficult to understand how Blaise had come to trust Professor Snape so very implicitly, but had not yet found an opportunity to ask without coming across as unfeeling.

They both had little reason to trust the adult males that presided over their lives; for Harry, that trust had been forever shattered the

summer before he had left for Hogwarts. His uncle had wanted to make an impression on him that he would never forget—and true to the bastard's intentions, he had not. To make matters worse, it had been a pattern of behavior that had only been reinforced every following summer after that.

But hands down, the worst so far was this past one, Harry thought, his stomach gurgling in a queasy manner. I should just get out of here.

And he would have too, if not for the "gift" that he had deposited in Malfoy's pocket, compliments of his increasingly advanced knowledge of potions and their ingredients following that intense summer long study session he had had via mail with Blaise.

It was a magical ingredient that reacted best to direct heat—like body heat for example. Harry knew that a little heat and a little moisture would go a long way towards the ultimate goal of reminding himself why he still lived. After all, if one couldn't laugh at the misfortunes of others—particularly those that one had had a direct hand in—then what was the point of anything at all, really?

Fucking Voldemort and Dumbledore can have their tea parties for all I give a shit, he thought, unaware that his face had turned particularly murderous in the past few moments. Luckily for him, few had noticed, given that the Sorting was still going on. In any case, it would not have mattered much to him either way whether or not he was frightening the other students.

If the question had been posed, he would have merely snorted and said that the other students deserved to be woken up from their happy and innocent moods. Why should they be happy when he could not be?

However, for all that he might grump or grouch about being happy, he really did long to know what it was like to comfortably be part of something without always being on the lookout for danger or pain. He wanted to know what it felt like to be able to trust in the motives of those sitting around him; as well as those who were supposed to be the guardians protecting him.

Unfortunately, he felt that his was a time long past such inane dreams. If he was to survive the next year, there could only be one

person that he could ultimately trust beyond a wish or a hope. Hope was for the weak; determination was for the survivors.

And as he was wont towards thinking as of lately, all others could kiss his pale skinny little arse.

HS HSHSHSHSHSHSHS

It happened just as the meal was ending and they were preparing to head to their dorms for the evening—an act that Harry was not looking forwards to.

He heard a sound from the Slytherin table, and then he saw a blond head jerk sideways as though trying to remove himself from an unpleasant situation. Dumbledore, in his infinite wisdom, did not say anything, but instead went ahead and dismissed the room to their beds for the evening. Harry got up slowly, not really watching, but just listening vaguely to the sounds emanating from the other side of the room.

He knew that the seed would have sprouted by now, turning Draco Malfoy's fine robes into its own breeding ground for the typically quick growing vines it sported. Malfoy had probably tried to stand up or move, only to discover that he was literally rooted to his spot on the wooden bench he had perched so elegantly on at the start of the Sorting.

Harry kept his face neutral as he left the Great Hall, but he did not fail to miss the outraged look on Malfoy's face—nor the slightly bemused look on Blaise's at watching his plight occur and erm, branch out, as it were.

The quiet and unvoiced amusement coming from his inner self would hopefully be enough to see him through the rest of that evening without killing anyone.

And then once he was past that point, he would set about making it to—and through—the next day.

HS HSHSHSHSHSHSHS

"Hey Harry!" A voice called out to him as he made his way up the staircase leading towards the Gryffindor tower.

He turned slightly, his hand already on his wand, and found himself face to face with Ginny Weasley.

"What happened to your glasses?" She asked, throwing him off with her disregard for everything else that had changed for him over the summer.

"Ah, a friend helped me by brewing a Clarifying Sight potion for me over the summer."

"Wow, that's gotta be a great friend! Do I know them? Are they single?"

He blinked at the flurry of questions, and tried not to trip as they finally made their way off the stairs.

"He's in my year," he finally answered. "But I don't know if you know him or not, as he isn't in our House."

They walked a bit farther down the hall before Ginny said anything more to him. This time, as she spoke, Harry could sense a definite shift in directions from just the look on her face as she started into it.

"I want to apologize for my brother Harry," was the unexpected comment.

He raised an eyebrow at her invitation to say more.

"And for myself as well; he wouldn't let me write you this summer, even though I really was very worried about you."

Something wavered in Harry's clenched heart at her words.

"You were?" He heard himself say without any forethought about how pitiful he must have seemed.

"Well yeah; anyone with half a brain would be after hearing what those fuckers have been like to you in the past."

Suddenly Harry found that he had missed Ginny's honest bluntness almost as much as the girl herself. It had hurt him deeply when Ron and Hermione had rebuffed his attempts at maintaining contact that

summer, but it had hurt almost as much to think that Ginny had agreed with them.

"Thanks," was his quiet reply.

When she looked at him oddly, he felt inclined to help her understand why exactly.

"For listening to me, among other things," he said by way of explanation.

"Well, you are very nearly a Weasley," she said, her face crumpling a bit as she thought about what she had said.

"Provided that you'd still want to be after the way we were these past few months."

"If the offer's still open, I'd like that very much," he said, feeling his throat constrict with his admission.

"You have to remember that Ron isn't the most important one in the family. He's not even the loudest," she said with a quiet giggle.

Harry smirked a bit at that.

"Mom and Dad have been worried too, but Dumbledore kept saying you were fine, you were fine, and not to interfere."

Dumbledore—that bastard, he thought with a wild roar in his head as he processed what she had said.

"Harry, you okay?"

"No," he whispered, his eyes distantly focused on a point just past her left shoulder. They had stopped in the hallway just a little ways from the Fat Lady's portrait.

"Can I do anything?"

He blinked and shook his head, trying to clear his mind from the terrible images that had begun rushing past his mind's eye ever since she had mentioned the name of their headmaster.

"I'm sorry then Harry," she said, misunderstanding his head shake to say that she couldn't help him.

Well she can't, so maybe her interpretation is okay.

"Thanks for asking though," he tried to smile at her, but he could tell from the continued look of worry in her expression that he must have done a piss poor job at it.

Little surprise there, he thought with an angry clench of his fists that were luckily hidden behind his back.

"Do you know the password?" He asked her then, breaking up their dour mood with something of a more immediate concern.

"Mystical Mushrooms," she said in response to him, but while looking at the Fat Lady in her portrait frame as well.

"Maybe Neville will be able to remember that one then," Harry said with an approving nod.

"That's why I suggested it," she said with an impish grin as they climbed in through the portrait opening.

"Smart girl," he muttered at her just under his breath as they stepped in a room already nearly full.

"I can understand why you might not want to hang around," she said to him as she left to go to her own dorm room.

He nodded to her as she passed and headed to his bed as well. Perhaps if he went to bed early that night, he might actually get some sleep before having to fight anyone.

He ignored the other fifth years that were all sitting around the fire next to the other upper levels of the Gryffindor House. He ignored their looks of disdain towards him and kept walking until he had reached his—their—room.

He sighed as he closed the door behind him and walked into the silence before him.

It was going to be a long night, but really, was that all that unusual?

"It isn't," he muttered despondently to himself as he went to go check his bed for curses.

. . .

A/N- *Given that some people have asked about what Blaise and Harry are doing at the beginning of the chapter, I thought I'd clarify it a bit here.

They are playing a game to help them study/remember the names of various potions ingredients. Although they could choose to use this game for any category, in this case, they are specifically discussing various poisons.

Aloe, Belladonna, Calatropin . . . these all are legitimate kinds of poisons. Jabberknoll parts are a magical ingredient, but that's not why Harry objects to Blaise's use of it in the game. Rather, it is because they are used in memory potions and truth serums, and therefore is not a correct ingredient for the game's current category.

In addition, when Harry refers to "Gelsemium sempervirens," and Blaise answers with "A bit far reaching, don't you think?" it is because this is the Latin name for Carolina Jessamine – a poisonous plant found in America.

Chapter 2 – The First Potions Class

The first Slytherin-Gryffindor fifth year Potions class initially started much the same as always, minus one significant difference.

Professor Snape burst through the door as he always did, only to be met by the sight of Harry Potter standing ramrod straight, his hands behind his back, and his long hair slicked back neatly into a ponytail.

Severus was also surprised to see that the boy was no longer wearing his glasses, making his green eyes seem just that much more piercing.

"Potter, what the hell are you doing?" He demanded as he made his way up to the front of the room.

"I'm standing in respect to you sir," the boy answered—completely seriously, Severus was surprised to note. If this was the boy's idea of a prank, then why weren't his nasty little friends doing it too? His eyes flicked over to the Weasley boy and was pleased to see the boy's face curled up in a look of disgust.

"Very well Potter," he said in a semi-exasperated voice. "Take a seat before you fall over."

"Yes sir," came the crisp reply, as the boy quickly followed his instruction.

Severus found himself raising an eyebrow at the boy in curious annoyance. Just what was Potter's new ploy for that year anyways? If he thought he could turn over a new leaf in Potions, he'd have to do more than just change his behavior.

With that thought in mind, he decided to test the boy's knowledge a bit.

"Potter!" He barked.

"Sir?"

"Name four poisonous plants all starting with the letter C," he said nastily, as the Gryffindor side of the room started grumbling and complaining about the unfairness of the request.

He wasn't at all prepared for the death glare that Potter then shot at his fellow Gryffindors, causing the room to become deathly silent as both Gryffindors and Slytherins waited with bated breath for his reply.

"Candelabras cactus, Carolina Jessamine, Chinaberry tree, and Castor Bean, sir," the boy rattled off quickly.

Snape found his eyes narrowing in surprise and suspicion at the boy's perfect answer, and decided that he wasn't quite finished with the boy yet.

"Correct, Potter," he ground out, mentally rolling his eyes over the exclamations of surprise throughout the room.

"Now can you tell me the Latin names for those plants you so inelegantly tossed out?"

A loud cry went up from the Gryffindor side of the room, but neither of them acknowledged the added noise. In fact, the boy neither reacted to them nor to his baiting, surprising him further. The boy barely blinked before giving him the requested information.

"Euphorbia lacteal, Gelsemium sempervirens, Melia azedarach, and Ricinus communis, sir," the boy answered crisply and perfectly.

Professor Snape felt a smirk coming upon his face and quickly stifled it.

As he turned back to his board, he settled for throwing in a shock of his own.

"Five points to Gryffindor, Mr. Potter."

HS

"Potter, stay after class. I wish to have a word with you," Severus said later that class period, after watching several failed attempts at creating what should have been a fairly simple antidote.

Potter however, had brewed a perfect specimen, further tweaking Severus's brain in the process. He had tried to lightly legitimise the boy, but had been thwarted there as well. It was an understatement

of vast proportions to say that he was perplexed at the changes in the boy.

Normally the child's face was easily readable, but now, perhaps because of the differences in the boy's face, he found himself unable to decipher his student's emotions nearly as readily as before. He also found himself wondering about the cause of the angry red scar down the side of the boy's face that had appeared since the end of the last term.

After the other students had left the room, he motioned Potter over to his desk, where he was half-leaning, half-sitting upon it. The pose had a tendency to frighten his students, as it meant that he was looming over them, and usually it was true for Potter as well, but as that day had shown him, it was not to be so.

"What is your explanation for your miraculous turnabout in class today?" He asked, his voice dripping with ill-disguised sarcastic disgust for the number of surprises he had been dealt that morning.

"I'm trying to distance myself from my father's legacy by taking a more hardnosed approach with my studies, sir," the boy said, standing before him, his back straight and his face much more straight edged than Snape had ever seen on the lad.

"Indeed." Snape said, raising an eyebrow in curiosity. "Whom, may I ask, is your new model for success," he bit out sarcastically.

"My mother, sir," the boy replied promptly; not a trace of a smile on that far too serious face of his.

Snape found himself studying the boy more closely, finally realizing that a great many of the details that had reminded him of Potter Sr. were no longer as prominently featured.

"I hope this determination turns into something more than a passing interest of yours," he said, a threat clearly laced in his words.

"I intend for it to do so, sir. I have no desire to be associated with the memories of a lackadaisical and cruel buffoon for the rest of my days, sir."

Who had been feeding Potter these words? They sounded almost—intelligent.

"And well you might," he said with a small nod. "Do you need a note to your next class?"

"No sir, thank you sir," the boy said, hurriedly gathering up his belongings and exiting the classroom.

Snape stayed lost in thought for some time after the boy had left, his eyes narrowed in deep thought.

HSHS

Instead of heading to lunch, Harry deviated his course by heading straight for the headmaster's office. Truth be told, he wasn't looking forwards to seeing the old man, but he'd be damned if he was going to suffer through another year of divination with that old fraud—especially since there were so many other pressing things on his plate now.

When he got to the gargoyle, he looked straight at its face, and demanded entry.

If he were inclined to smile, he would have when the gargoyle reluctantly creaked open, revealing the moving stairs leading upwards to Dumbledore's most sacred domain.

"Ah Harry, I was wondering when you were going to drop by," Dumbledore said before he even made it through the door. He scowled at the man for his accuracy, but otherwise merely nodded his reply to the man's jovial greeting.

"Lemon drop?"

"No, thank you."

Damned fool, he thought bitterly, as he sat lightly at the edge of the only straight backed chair in the room.

"What can I do for you, my boy?"

"Allow me to officially drop Divination as a class," he said, speaking with terse, clipped tones to this man who had so very failed him.

The phrasing of his question was deliberate; indicating that he was going to stop going either way, but he would at least prefer to be official if he could at all help it.

"Why this sudden need to drop a class?" The man's eyes twinkled brightly at him, turning his stomach ever so slightly.

He knew that Dumbledore's reply was more about information hunting than any real concern for him.

"I need the time to focus on more important things," he said.

There, let the old man chew on THAT.

He watched the older man as he slowly took off his glasses and cleaned them, before looking back at Harry.

"I know that Divination is not your most favorite subject, but if you will remember, the initial decision to take this class was entirely your own."

Ah, avoidance.

"A younger and much more trusting me made that decision, sir," he said, gritting his teeth against the suddenly overwhelming desire to hex the man to bits where he sat.

"I know that you took Cedric's death very hard—as we all did," the headmaster said gravely, his eyes finally dimming and matching the waning evening sky that was present through the window on the far wall.

"True, that's some of what has forced me to grow up, but I think the largest part was your fault sir." He said, wishing he could punch the man in his thin, already broken nose.

"My fault?" Dumbledore asked with some surprise.

"If you had listened to me any in the past, you'd know what it was that I was talking about." He said bitterly.

"Harry, I—," the old man started to say, before Harry cut him off by abruptly getting to his feet.

"Let me just put it this way, sir," he said, with no little sarcasm on the word.

"After all the time I have spent with the Dursleys, I can certainly understand how the Dark Lord feels in regards to Muggles. When I reach my majority, you can bet that I'm going to pay them a visit," he said menacingly.

He became aware that his hands had curled into fists and he made a conscious effort to relax them.

"And furthermore, if he were not so hell bent on killing me, I think it would almost be worth seeing the look on your face for me to join him," he spat out, pointing his finger at the paling wizard before him.

"Don't worry about Divination; I'm sure I'll be able to see another way around it. Good day sir," he said, turning on his heel and striding out of the damnable office before he really lost his control.

HSHSHS

Not too much after that confrontation, Severus Snape found himself being summoned to Albus's office for a "chat." Albus had been far too serious when he had first called him, and truth be told, he found the man to be much more worrisome when he was calm.

"Sir?" He said, after knocking on the door for entry. That he had been forced to knock on the door was merely another sign that something was wrong.

He entered his mentor's office with a sick feeling of unease firmly lodged in his gut, but he hid his feelings behind a stiff sneer.

After taking a seat and waving a hand at the ubiquitous lemon drops Albus always seemed to have in supply, he decided to stop the charade and just tell Albus to have out with it before the unspoken concern drove them both nuts. Luckily for his reputation, Albus beat him to the punch.

"Have you seen young Harry today?" Albus said, folding his hands together and leaning forwards towards him.

"I had class with Mr. Potter just this morning," he had admitted; purposely being obtuse about what the man was inquiring on.

Albus sighed and Severus watched the man as he seemed to literally age before his eyes. The wizard before him was weary and tired, not at all like his normal extravagant self.

"How did he seem to you?" Albus asked him softly.

Severus thought over that morning carefully before finally coming up with an answer that would not tell the other man too much of how he really felt.

"Surprisingly determined."

"Indeed," Albus said, peering expectantly at him.

"What is it you want me to say?" He asked grumpily, crossing his arms decisively in front of him.

"You awarded him points, did you not?"

"I'm still allowed to do that, am I not?"

"You're evading, Severus."

"You, on the other hand Albus, are fishing for something." Severus accused; narrowing his eyes at the man across the desk from him.

"I am worried about him," the man admitted; as he stood up and turned to the window, his hands crossed elegantly behind his back.

"Could you not say these things to him yourself?" Severus asked tiredly. He hated always having to play the part of the rational one. "Sometimes I wonder if I am not just a sounding board for you Albus," he muttered, none too quietly.

"Do you really feel that way?" Albus said, turning sharply to look at him sadly.

It was those looks that he despised the most; the looks that filled him with guilt when he thought about how much this man really had done for him.

"Not usually, no," he admitted reluctantly.

"I hope you would feel comfortable enough with me to let me know if someone was bothering you though, Severus."

He opened his mouth to reply that if he did that, they'd be there for the rest of the night—or even the week itself—before he realized the utter futility of it and closed it once more. He gave a sigh of his own and sat back in the chair, waiting for an explanation of Albus's mood that would hopefully make some kind of sense.

"I fear we may be losing him," the older man said finally after another lengthy pause.

"How so?" Severus asked, wishing Albus would get to his point, and preferably before midnight.

"He was in here earlier today, during lunch, hoping to drop Divination from his schedule."

Severus grunted thoughtfully, remembering his own conversation with the boy.

"I asked him why, and that led us to discussing Cedric's death."

Severus looked up sharply at hearing the old man's words. He suspected rather strongly that the conversation had not gone nearly as smoothly as just that.

"And?" He asked, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice.

"He may have mentioned something about wanting revenge on his muggle relatives," Albus said vaguely.

Severus waited for the follow-up that he was sure to come. He was not to be disappointed.

"He said that it was thanks in part to both them, and me, that he can understand why Tom developed his particular opinion of muggles," Albus said with a deep sigh, finally taking his seat once again.

Severus' eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"I can see why that would disturb you," he murmured.

"Severus, I need you to keep an eye on him this term," the headmaster's voice was beseeching.

"I always have; you know that."

"More so this time around, if at all possible, Severus; I don't think I can stand the thought of—," Albus trailed off, looking ashamed.

Another mistake like me? Or Tom?

"I'll see what I can do," Severus said roughly.

"That's all I can ask, my dear boy; that's all I can ask," Albus said quietly as Severus took his leave of him, and headed back to the dungeons where he belonged.

HSHSHS

Harry pushed past his dorm mates and headed for bed, aware of the whispers and looks that followed him, but too tired to really give a damn. His conversation with the old man had weighed on his mind all that afternoon and evening, and he was tired of trying to plan for all of the situations that might arise because of it. Most of all, he hoped that the conversation didn't get back to Professor Snape and cause him to think any less of Harry as a result.

He had done something that morning in the man's class, and he was proud of it. He had shown the man that he wasn't just another dimwit, and that he had the potential not to just be a clone of his father—inadvertently or not.

But the idea that he might have fucked it all up because of a meddling old man and his stupid ideas made him more than a little sick to his stomach.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" A voice demanded as he stepped through the doorway of the fifth years' bedroom.

Oh. It was Ron-great, just what he needed.

"I'm really tired Ron. Can't you bitch at me tomorrow?" He said quietly, trying to push past the taller boy and get to his bed.

What he hadn't expected was for Ron to grab the front of his robes and bodily throw him backwards. He managed to stay on his feet, but only just.

"I'd expect that sort of action from some people, but not you Ron," he snarled.

"You're completely unbelievable, you know that Harry? I can't believe that you, of all people, are trying to suck up to Snape." Ron bit out with more than a touch of cruelty.

"What are you going to do Ron? Beat it out of me?" He said in a low voice, already fingering his wand.

"Maybe I'll just take a page out of Sirius's book," Ron sneered; his words freezing Harry in his spot.

He can't know about that! How can he know about that? Harry thought desperately, but managed to keep his expression down to a dead minimum.

"You little piss-wad. Why don't you just go fuck yourself," Harry growled, barely keeping himself under control.

"I would," Ron replied, making a great show of casually examining his fingernails. "But I've heard so much about what an excellent little whore you've become, I don't see why I should waste the opportunity. Is it true that you really spread your legs for anyone, Harry?"

He didn't even think about the words of the spell as his magic reacted for him, blindly reaching out for the asshole in front of him and freezing him in his spot. He watched as Ron wavered for a moment before crashing backwards with a bang.

Quickly he shrunk down his trunk—he hadn't bothered to unpack, thanks to a feeling that he had already overstayed his welcome—and put it in an inside pocket. Then he went over to where Ron still lay and looked down at him angrily.

"Hey shithead," he whispered, just to see Ron's eyes light up with fiery malice.

"I don't know why I put up with you for four years, but you can officially consider our friendship over. And if you value your balls, I wouldn't continue spouting off lies that you have no understanding of."

And then to emphasize his point, he lifted up his leg and stomped down hard on the other boy's crotch, eliciting a painful sounding howl from the clenched jaw of one red haired, floor level boy.

Harry turned on his heel and left with the intent never to return if at all possible.

He didn't even look back.

HS HSHSHSHS

The next morning at breakfast, Hermione sat and anxiously picked at her food. She was watching for Harry and Ron, since no one had heard from either of them since the previous evening.

Over that summer, Ron had finally asked her to be his girlfriend; a state of being that she thought she'd love, but so far, things weren't turning out quite as she had predicted. In his own way, Ron was sweet to her, but he had a vicious streak that she apparently had never bothered to really notice before.

She had never known just how far his jealousy for Harry extended until she had been forced to listen to his complaints all summer long. Mostly the rants—for that's what they were—were focused on how Harry took too many things for granted, and how he didn't appreciate his fame enough. Ron had told her time and time again that if he were famous, he would do something great with his fame, but she knew from listening to Harry that there were plenty of downsides to being famous as well.

She wondered if Ron had ever stopped to really think about them. She knew that he didn't fully realize that Harry was jealous of him as well, for exactly the opposite reasons. The whole mess was idiotic, but the one and only time that she'd tried to point it out to him, he'd blown up at her, scaring her a little in process.

She had felt bad enough about it, that she had let him coerce her into finally having sex with him; something she felt incredibly idiotic about later on, but that's just the kind of effect he had on her. Although she didn't have any prior experience with sexual matters—well, not much anyways—she could tell that Ron was a natural in the sack. As with all things that he was deeply interested in, his attention and focus were extremely intense during the actual act itself; making her feel as though she were the only creature in the universe worthy of his attention and administrations of love.

She liked that part of it. The orgasms she had just by her own hand were paltry in comparison; nearly causing her to give up masturbating altogether.

It was Ron's angry outbursts that she honestly found herself fearful of; outbursts which, if she were honest with herself, she would have to admit were occurring at a higher and higher rate the longer she stayed with him.

She felt bad that she hadn't kept in better contact with Harry that summer. He had had a rough time of it that previous year, and Cedric's death certainly had not helped matters along any. She knew that his relatives were unpleasant, but she couldn't make herself believe that they were actually violent towards him. Surely Dumbledore would have removed him from such a situation, wouldn't he have?

Yet a small inner voice told her that if she wanted proof of that violence, she merely needed to look to that angry red scar running nearly the entire length of the left side of his face. Something had changed for her friend that past summer, but she wasn't sure if she could handle thinking about what might have happened to make him change this much.

Having decided that neither Ron nor Harry were going to show up that morning, she slowly gathered up her things and made her way to her first class of the day.

Oh Harry, she thought wistfully to the boy who had been one of her first friends in the wizarding world. What has happened to you?

HSHSHSHSHS

Harry spent the night in the room of requirement, and actually had a restful night for the first time in a long while. He grabbed breakfast straight from the kitchens on his way to Charms, and by the grace of Merlin, managed to avoid seeing anyone he knew on that entire trek.

He knew that his luck was going to run out at some point, but he was surprised that he made it all the way through charms and then Transfiguration before it did. He was unsurprised to see that Ron did not make either class, but he was bothered by the fact that Hermione kept trying to speak to him; even after he had put her off several times.

"Mr. Potter." Professor McGonagall said at the end of their class. "You will stay after class."

It wasn't a detention, but the tone of her voice coupled with the look on her face meant that whatever it was about wasn't going to be a good experience for him. The rest of the class knew it too, but wisely no one spoke to him—not even Hermione, or Granger, as he needed to start thinking of her again as.

He still scowled at them all after her announcement to him; even though he was fully aware that his was a mild and ultimately useless rebellion.

The class vacated the classroom at an unusually fast pace, while he merely reclined farther in his seat, making a point that he wasn't bothered by her words in the least.

Besides, what's the worst she can do? Smack me around?

He smirked at the thought, but dropped the expression when he saw her glaring at him.

"Mr. Potter, I don't know what happened between you and Mr. Weasley last night, but I don't want to hear of anything like it again, understand me?" She said, speaking in very short and clipped tones.

As long as I don't ever have to see that slime ball again, there won't be a problem.

"Yes ma'am," he said, trying to make his face seem earnest.

"And you will return to the Gryffindor dorms tonight. Do I make myself clear?"

Ah, he had a problem with that. Time to show her that he wasn't the same old loser freak he had been in previous years.

"Yes ma'am, you make yourself very clear. Unfortunately I can't comply," he said, leaning back and waiting for the likely explosion.

He wasn't disappointed.

"Excuse me? Mr. Potter? And why are you suddenly too good for dorm life?"

Why does everyone think I live the life of a fucking prince?

"No, I'm just trying to keep from going to Azkaban until I've turned at least sixteen," he said, narrowing his eyes at her before grabbing his stuff and trying to make his way to the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" She exclaimed, her magic shutting the door forcefully in his face. "I don't believe that I had told you this conversation was finished," she said, her Scottish brogue becoming thicker with each word.

"Fine! What?" He said throwing his stuff onto a nearby desk and taking a seat beside it.

"I don't know what your problem is this year, but I suggest you lose it now."

"Or what? You'll take points?" He threw out in a mocking tone, reveling in the many new facial expressions he was causing her to make in reaction to him.

"I believe the headmaster might be interested in speaking with you about this detrimental attitude of yours," she said, her eyes lighting up in anger.

"I really don't think he wants to talk to me anymore, professor. He's rather disappointed in me as well." He said with a sneer.

"And yet you seem not to care one whit. I wonder why not, Mr. Potter?" She said, fixing an expectant and stony stare on him.

He could play that game. He stared steadily back at her, narrowing his eyes in anticipation of what punishment she would dish out for his latest transgression.

"I am putting you on probation from Quidditch," she said after a moment more.

"That should segue perfectly into my plans for quitting the team," he spat, smiling a cheerless snarl at her.

He heard her suddenly gasp inwards at his words, but he wasn't really watching her anymore. If he could survive his uncle—no, he was pointedly not thinking that thought!

"I am disappointed in you Mr. Potter. I would think that you had more respect for your house than this."

Yay, guilt, he thought with no little embitterment on his part.

"If they would give me respect, I am certain that I could find a way to show them the same," he said, running a hand through his hair with more than a little agitation.

"I wonder what your father would say if he were here now," she said, speaking much more softly than before.

"I don't really give a damn what the cocksucker might have said, provided that he had lived," Harry said; knowing full and well that he had just crossed the line into the unforgiveable.

He watched his professor march towards him angrily, her face becoming redder with each step, and he fought against the urge to run.

He wasn't going to be afraid of her or anyone else ever again, for that matter. He simple wasn't.

So it was no small surprise that he found himself in the headmaster's office for the second day in a row; only this time, he got the added bonus of having to listen to her rant about him for more than half an hour.

Oh joy, he thought sourly, actually openly rolling his eyes at her histrionics. They weren't doing anything for him, they hadn't helped him any; so why should he play their stupid games? What did he get out of it really?

It was all bullshit. Everything was bullshit. He tuned them out and pulled out his potions text to continue studying while they decided how best to punish him.

Really, he thought with a bitter snarl inwards, I think I've been punished enough. No one else has to put up with a summer of being repeatedly raped by one's guardian. Oh yeah, my life is real fucking perfect. Fuck them. Fuck all of them.

Chapter Three – A New Approach to the Potter Problem

"Tell me Harry," Dumbledore said, "why are you quitting your Quidditch team?"

"Because it's a waste of my time, sir," he said through gritted teeth.

Couldn't they just leave him be? How much suffering did they want from him? Hadn't he done enough to pay for his part in Cedric's death?

Apparently he hadn't, because it was then that Professor Snape walked through the door.

"Headmaster? You wanted to see me?"

Harry quickly made it to his feet, his back abruptly straight; his face completely devoid of any obvious emotions.

He quietly found secret pleasure in seeing his head of house staring at him with open mouthed amazement, but he kept it to himself.

"Ah yes, Severus. Thank you for joining us," Dumbledore said, waving him to a seat in-between Harry and Professor McGonagall.

Harry remained standing until Professor Snape found his seat, and then he took his seat once more. He ignored the look of amusement on Dumbledore's face, the look of bewilderment on McGonagall's face, and the stiff look of indifference on Professor Snape's face.

Dumbledore laid out most of the issue for Professor Snape, with McGonagall cutting in every so often to add her two cents, while Professor Snape merely sat and listened, a sneer permanently affixed upon his pale face.

"And then he said—," McGonagall cut herself off, flustered as how to describe what Harry had said. She finally settled for stealing one of Dumbledore's quills and writing the offensive word down, before thrusting the scrap piece of paper at Professor Snape.

Harry watched the exchange carefully in quiet amusement, and thought he saw a brief look of something similar cross his surly looking professor's face.

"Why Minerva," Professor Snape spoke with mock surprise, "I had no idea you even had heard of the word 'cocksucker.'"

Harry couldn't help it, he snorted at Professor Snape's words and his head of house's resulting angry expression.

"Do you have something to add to this monumental waste of my time as well, Mr. Potter?" Professor Snape said icily, turning to look at him with an extremely unpleasant expression on his face.

"No sir," Harry answered swiftly, his eyes wide.

"I sincerely apologize, sir. It won't happen again sir."

He felt, more than heard, his professor let out a low grunt as he turned back around, causing him to miss the look that passed between his head of house and the headmaster.

Harry thought it a definite possibility that he might get expelled at some point that year, but he was ready for that if necessary. If that happened, he would just kill his uncle with muggle means instead of magic. It wasn't particularly an uplifting thought, but at least he was prepared for it.

"Why exactly have I been called in to help deal with one of your house problems, Minerva?" He dimly heard Professor Snape asking McGonagall, breaking him out of his darker thoughts.

"Oddly enough, I would not have believed it, given your histories, but for whatever reason, Mr. Potter seems to be only responding to you Severus," Professor McGonagall said, speaking in a somewhat mystified voice.

"Only because he knows what will happen if he tries anything of the likes with me," Professor Snape said with a dark growl.

Harry didn't visibly react, but he still got a chill down his spine with his professor's words. He honestly hadn't thought that Snape would be called in on for an inter-house situation with him, but he supposed that it was what he got for underestimating the tenacity of Professor Dumbledore's will.

"What do you suggest as a course of action for him, Severus?" Dumbledore asked, bringing Professor Snape's attention back to front.

"Punishment, of course," Professor Snape said matter-of-factly.

"Any specific suggestions?"

Professor Snape was quiet for a moment while contemplating the situation. Then he turned to glance at Harry briefly before turning his attention back to the headmaster's concerned visage.

"I'm sure I can think of something," he said with a grim expression.

"And his sleeping situation?" McGonagall asked tersely.

"Put him back in his dorm. If he won't stay, stick him to the bed. Honestly Minerva," he snarled with an exasperated look at her.

HS

If it had been for any other student, Severus might have been inclined to be more amused than anything with the situation he had been dragged into. As it was, he was simply furious at both Minerva's ineptitude and also the headmaster's insipid attempts at disciplining the apathetic excuse for a boy. So when he left the office with one bedraggled looking waif in tow, he was not in any kind of mood for being interrupted or bothered.

Before him, students scattered and other professors simply avoided looking at him or his victim—er, student. He didn't care that it was lunchtime or that Potter likely had another class to attend, or that he was being asked to waste some of the precious few hours he had open amongst his overstuffed schedule.

All he cared about was the fact that those goody goody Gryffindors couldn't stomach dishing out harsh enough discipline, and instead had handed it off to him—the more or less ex-death eater Slytherin head of house.

Yes, because Slytherins are used to dealing with inexplicable evilness. He would have rolled his eyes at the utter absurdity of it all, but he hadn't wanted to spare the energy for such idiocy.

If they couldn't handle what needed to be done to put the boy in line, then he'd do it, and he'd do it in such a way that Potter would likely never forget.

They turned down the hallway leading to one of the private laboratories he had on hand for his 6th and 7th year students to work on for experiments. The air turned foul as soon as they were only a few steps down, but Severus didn't hear any kind of sound from Potter; something he hadn't thought possible before then.

Just wait, his mind thought with an almost gleeful maliciousness.

The particular laboratory that they were headed to was one that had suffered an explosion of incredibly smelly proportions. Furthermore, the purplish-brown gunk that his students had inadvertently created smelled inexplicably horrible; causing more than one student serving detention down there to accidentally lose the contents of their stomach—in turn, helping to further add to the smell.

As if that weren't bad enough in and of itself alone, the gunk was stuck hard to nearly every surface in there—ceilings, walls, you name it. Thus far they had only managed to remove the goo using physical means: scrapers and ice picks sharpened with magic that, in any other circumstances, would slice through nearly anything.

The goop seemed to have no end of nasty surprises associated with it. In addition to all of the other difficulties that it had created for Severus, it also was a serious danger, in that it was toxic to human skin; literally burning any flesh that it came in contact with. Unfortunately, the creators of the failed potion had learned that when the explosion had initially taken place. Luckily none of his Slytherins had been involved, but as it was, two Ravenclaws and a Hufflepuff had sustained injuries of excessively painful proportions—if the screams Severus had heard all the way from the other side of the dungeons had been any indication.

The extent and seriousness of those three students' injuries had forced Poppy to have them transferred to St. Mungos; where they had undergone several painful treatments in order to replace the skin—and some bone in one girl's case—that had literally melted away.

Severus, after several weeks of being awakened by nightmares in which those screams had played the grisly background soundtrack for, was now working for a way to remedy the situation; hopefully by discovering some kind of neutralizing agent with which to either vanquish the muck more safely, or at the very least, more easily.

It was that room to which Severus was taking the boy. Ever since the accident (which had occurred in the last month of the previous school year), he had been using the room for dealing with serious discipline problems. After all, having his students clean cauldrons simply didn't compare with the ghastliness of working on the goop.

HSHS

The room that his professor stopped in front of was unfortunately the one where the disgusting smell was emanating from. The smell was more than offensive; it was completely rank and horrible, reminding Harry a great deal of the way his bed had smelled at the end of the previous summer.

No, I will not think about that! He swallowed his bile and stilled his insides, turning his face to the stone that he had presented his uncle with all summer long.

Nothing can touch me; I'm not real—I don't exist!

He was simply an observer to the horrors that went on unchecked around him. His experiences were merely punishment for accidentally having been the one to live when the hero had died. Fate had fucked up, and now he had to pay the price.

"Notice that there is no door for this room. It was taken off when I realized just how high the toxicity of the fumes could get with no ventilation," Professor Snape told him in a dangerously low voice.

"This is a failed experiment that some of my upper years managed to create by accident. It goes beyond any explosion of mere Longbottom proportions. The product created is extremely toxic to human skin; meaning that you should not, under any circumstances, touch the stuff with your bare hands. Do you understand me, Potter?" The man asked him sharply; piercing through his thoughts with his voice, as well as the intensity of his eyes.

"Yes sir," he said seriously, looking intently back into his professor's face.

The man made him put on a pair of dragon hide gloves before handing him some kind of scraper and what looked like an ice pick.

"These have been sharpened using magic; so do not touch these unless you are wearing the gloves."

Last of all, the man flicked his wand and muttered something too low for Harry to pick out, but the effect was obvious, as Harry soon had a pair of tight fitting goggles and a face mask of some configuration now covering his nose and mouth.

"Do you see the space that is free of the potion here on the floor, Potter?"

He looked down where his professor was pointing and saw a space of approximately two feet by two and a half—roughly—scratched out on the floor directly next to the doorway.

"Yes sir," he said, his voice muffled by the mask.

"It took three students a total of two weeks, working in every spare moment of their schedules, to clear that much. Do you understand me Potter?" The man stated; a smirk appearing on his face as Harry realized the sheer enormity of the task before him.

"You have been excused from attending all of your classes, except mine, for the next two weeks. You will still be expected to keep up with your homework though," the man smirked snarkily at him.

"Let's see if you can't do any better, shall we?" Snape said, turning around and sauntering away.

"Oh, and if you decide not to work, I will know and you will regret it," the man called out to him before he left the hallway completely.

Harry looked back to the dark violet creation that coated nearly every surface in the room and narrowed his eyes in stubbornness.

I'll show him what I can do, and he'll see.

He wondered if he could possibly figure out a way to help rid the room of the mess with some kind of potion. He and Blaise had been writing notes back and forth all summer to help beef up their knowledge of potions in hopes of doing better that year in Snape's class, which was rumored to be impossibly difficult.

He took a step forwards into the space cleared out by the previous victims of the impossible detention, and knelt down, determined to show his professor just how tough he really was.

HSHSHS

After not seeing Harry at either breakfast or lunch, Hermione had sucked up her courage and asked Professor McGonagall about him.

The look that came over her head of house's face was a cross between completely exasperated and furious, telling Hermione that her hunch was right in some way. Harry was in some kind of trouble.

Well, after what he was like in Transfiguration this morning, who can blame Professor McGonagall for getting angry?

"Mr. Potter," Professor McGonagall said with a sharp emphasis on his name, "is currently indisposed, and will continue to be so for another few weeks."

"Is he okay?" Hermione asked anxiously.

Professor McGonagall shot her an undecipherable look before answering.

"More or less, I should think. He is in a lot of trouble and is currently serving out a series of detentions with Professor Snape," she said.

"May I ask as to what he did to get into trouble?" She pressed, knowing that she was likely annoying her professor, but not wanting to let it drop at just that.

"No, you may not," McGonagall retorted sharply, looking over her glasses at her.

And that was that. Hermione left her feeling a bit dejected, but still dedicated to finding out what was wrong with her friend.

That night she entered the common room to find Ron seated in one of the armchairs nearest the fire. The mornings and evenings had already turned crisp and cool, even though it was only the first week of school, promising what was likely to be a bitterly cold winter.

"Ron! I've been looking everywhere for you!" She exclaimed, running to his side.

"Well here I am," her boyfriend said with a crooked, yet tired smile.

"Where have you been all day?" She said, trying to pry him for details.

"Potter put me in the infirmary," he said; speaking blandly as though he were merely commenting on the weather.

In comparison, Hermione's reactionary shout was far over the top.

"He WHAT?" She screeched, causing the few people in the common room to all turn and stare at her in bewilderment.

"Don't worry. Madam Pomfrey has assured me that I will still be able to produce heirs," he said, still calmly smiling that odd half smile. "Weasleys are of course known for their hardy sperm."

"Oh my god!" She exclaimed, finally understanding what had happened.

"How do you feel?"

"Not much at the moment; she's got me somewhat numbed from about the waist down."

"What happened? Did it happen last night? Is that why neither of you were at breakfast?" She babbled anxiously at him, while absentmindedly stroking her hand over his chest.

"Potter wasn't at breakfast?" He asked, a frown coming over his face.

"No he wasn't; he wasn't at lunch or dinner either," she said worriedly, speaking at a much lowered volume.

"Yeah, it happened last night. The fucker attacked me; after I wouldn't let him just keep ignoring me. He came up behind me; can you believe that 'Mione?"

Actually she couldn't believe it, but she knew better than to say so.

"And then the git cast petrificus totalus on me, before proceeding to stomp on my boys," he growled angrily to her.

On his boys? She thought somewhat hysterically in her mind, but kept that outburst to herself as well.

"Oh my poor Ron!" She gushed instead, pulling his face towards her and kissing him gently. She didn't even object when he ran his hand up her skirt and began fingering her slightly, right there in the common room!

He touched her in just the right spots, causing her to stop kissing him and instead turn her face into his chest to stifle her sudden moans. A few more minutes of his maddening touches, and she abruptly bit her lip tightly as he caused her to come right then and there.

Very casually, not even looking around at the others in the room with them, he pulled out his wet fingers from inside her and brought them to his lips, licking them sensuously in front of her.

"How badly are you hurt, Ron?" She asked in a breathy voice; her mind wiped clear of anything but her need for him to fill her completely, then and there if need be.

"I think I might be up to something," he said seductively into her ear.

It was still early in the evening; meaning that no one was in the 5th year's boy room when they went in. They managed to wait until they were safely ensconced behind the heavy curtains of Ron's bed before going any further, but once they were there, it was a mad rush to free their bodies of the offending articles of clothing in the way of their love making.

She carefully kissed him all over, especially the insides of his thighs, knowing that those were two of his most sensitive spots. She rewarded him for her earlier orgasm by going down on him, and

sucking him deep into the warm moist cavern of her mouth. She pressed her tongue against the underside of his shaft, pressing and licking the large vein there; in turn wrenching the most delightful sounds out of his throat as she did so.

"Mione!" He gasped, plunging his fingers into her long hair and pulling her farther down onto his shaft, gagging her slightly. She knew that the back of her throat was fluttering against the sensitive head of his member, and she was filled with amazement that she could cause him so much pleasure with such a little thing. Finally she pulled off a bit to catch some air, lest she pass out, before breathing in deeply and sucking him down—all the way into her throat.

He bucked against her mouth, stroking her face mindlessly as she increased the suction of her mouth against his flesh.

He keened once, twice, the tension in his body building to an impossible climax, before letting out a hoarse cry and unloading down her throat.

She had to swallow several times to keep from vomiting, but she managed to keep herself under control as she removed her mouth from his softening flesh.

"Bloody amazing, 'Mione," he whispered in a breathy voice, flipping her over on her back and straddling her hips. His dick was already perking up as he looked her over, before leaning over to tongue her left nipple. She was very sensitive there, and his tongue made her feel as though she were about to fly off of the bed with the sensations he was creating in her.

"Ron!" She cried out hoarsely. "Please!" She begged, only to have him switch nipples and attach himself to the other, this time biting down with his teeth very lightly.

She threw her head back and balled up her fists to keep from touching herself, because she knew he didn't like that. He had said more than once that her pussy was his and his alone, and no one else, including herself, was ever going to touch it again in order to produce pleasurable sensations.

"Ron!" She cried, trying to pull him down onto her body.

Finally, relief as he let go. She felt, more than saw, him reach for his wand and cast the spell to keep her from becoming pregnant.

And then he was touching her there with his fingers once more, pushing into her gently, yet with some force, testing to see if she was ready for him. She always was, but he always checked, and she liked that.

She abruptly felt empty as he removed his fingers and replaced them with his long shaft. She gasped as he pressed against her clit, and didn't even notice it as he bent down and attached his teeth to her nipple again, biting harder this time. His hands were running up and down her sides, while her own hands were gripping his buttocks tightly, trying to urge him faster into her. But he ignored her wishes, pushing insanely slowly into her wet depths, pushing her into the mattress with his greater weight as he did so.

When he was finally in as deep as he could go, he brought his fingers up and began pinching and twisting the nipple not otherwise occupied by his mouth; causing her to cry out with the dichotomy of the sensations rippling through her. It was then, and only then, that he began to truly fuck her. With an extreme look of concentration on his face, he pulled out of her, only to thrust back in hard; pushing the air out of her lungs as he did so. As his thrusts sped up he began to suck on her breast with the same force; his efforts ultimately leaving her with livid black and blue bruises that would hurt for the rest of the week. They went unhealed at his insistence that she not erase any part of their lovemaking.

His balls were slapping her almost painfully now as he pulled back and forth in her; building a wonderful climax that almost always caused her to scream with its force. He finally released her breast, only to reattach his teeth to her neck. He wrapped his arms around the backs of her shoulders, pulling her body to meet his with an even stronger momentum than before. She was moaning now, her eyes rolling in her head as he fucked her with all of his fury driving behind him.

She was shaking with the effort of staying conscious, and she could feel the trembling reflected back at her through his torso as well. They pushed and pulled until they were almost one being, caressing and sliding together, back and forth, back and forth. She couldn't get

any air and she couldn't feel anything but him, and the world began fading in and out around them.

And then, just as she thought she would not be able to stand one more moment of the wild bucking of their hips together, the motion of his body pushed one last hard time into her, and he pulled her tight with a strength she rarely saw him exhibit, biting her shoulder hard enough to break the skin. She cried out with a sound that was more scream than moan as they shuddered together, finally skidding to a halt; her clit squeezing and jerking with the force of her orgasm, while she gasped for air against his much heavier weight.

And then he pulled them both on their sides, facing each other, but not looking, just breathing their exertions breathily back and forth in a wordless conversation of release.

It was then that she closed her eyes and surrendered to the darkness that had been threatening her attention for the past few moments.

Thus she slept, still entwined tightly with her lover.

HSHSHS

The room was spinning in front of his eyes by the time a house elf finally brought him dinner. Harry was only able to eat a few bites before pushing the rest away, afraid he would puke the little he had managed to keep down. He put the bread in a pocket of his robes for later and drank all of his pumpkin juice; purposely not thinking about anything, just existing in a mindless state. Then he went back to the insanely difficult project that he had been given by Professor Snape, and tried to get back into the groove he had been in before stopping.

The crud—as he had finally decided on calling it in his mind—was simply awful in every way imaginable. It wasn't just dried on; it was stuck on. It didn't classify as being dried on because the stuff wasn't dry. It moved and gurgled, and every so often, it let out a belch of putrid smelling air. The first time that had happened, he had scrambled backwards in fear; irrationally—or perhaps simply cautiously—afraid that it was coming to life out of anger towards him and his meddling.

Nothing like that had happened, and he had ended up feeling somewhat foolish for his reaction, but he really couldn't help the fact that the crud's movement and actions were slightly more sentient than he would have preferred.

The work itself was one step below mindless, but not quite stimulating enough to be interesting. He had tried to keep his mind on at first, but the smell kept reinvading his senses, reminding him of that crusty old mattress that was probably still sitting in his room at the Dursleys; just waiting for his return so it could add to its own collection of gross injustices.

And since he was not thinking about that, and he couldn't seem to get his brain to think on any other subjects—certainly not with any kind of reliability—his only recourse was to simply drift away into the place he had gone, so to speak, during the time that he was pointedly not thinking of.

It was a horrible paradox to even consider, so he didn't, but he was afraid that his mind would try to analyze it later when it was functioning more or less correctly once more.

During the summer he had classified it as a state of mental bleakness; a wasteland of nothingness that had filled his mouth and ears with its inextricable pounding, buzzing despair over what was not and what could never be. He was barely even an observer, but felt himself more to be like a vessel of sensations—mostly pain, followed closely by shame for what was happening to him.

He was rather thankful that Snape hadn't allowed him a chance to eat lunch. He would have thrown it up within the first ten minutes, he felt certain.

Now he was bent over on the floor once more, prying, pulling and chiseling the crud out of the cracks of the cold stone; actions which reminded him of weeding in an odd sort of way. The crud, like the hard floor that was slowly reducing his knees to pulp, was frigid to the touch, even through the dragon hide gloves that Snape had given him to work in. It was a bit counterintuitive really, that the stuff was so flexible and yet so very, very cold too. Harry had never seen anything like it before, and he hoped to Merlin that he never did again either.

Plus, he had to be careful about the way he moved and positioned himself, since some of the contusions from the last weeks of summer had yet to fade from his back and thighs and chest. Every time he moved, whether it be inching forwards because of his minute progress, or sitting up to relieve a sudden muscle cramp, had to be done slowly and delicately, lest he further aggravate an already existing injury.

An hour after his so-called "dinner," he abruptly pulled off his gloves and mask, and hurriedly pushed himself into the hallway; all so that he could he could spit out the blood that had come suddenly come up from his stomach.

My so-called stomach, he thought tiredly as he vanished the mess with his wand.

At least it isn't mixed with anything white, he thought with a shudder.

Then he went back to where he had been and started it all up again.

HSHSHSHS

Snape didn't forget about the Potter boy, but he didn't feel the need to visit him either. The presence of his wards there in the room and the hallway meant that he didn't need to check up on him physically unless something went wrong. Besides, the smell of that room was truly rank; reminding him strongly of the way a room smelled following a Death Eaters' torture session of some innocent soul.

It was an odor that was tinged with the reminders of a victim's impending death: the stench of the bowels as they released; the smell of old blood mixing with new; all combining with the dank chill of the room—cold sweat, rotting offal, moldy hunkered forms in the corner slowly decomposing—these were the images that the offensive odor of the goop in that room had kept managing to bring up for him.

In a way, the gunk was almost worse than the presence of a Dementor; at least when the Dementor went away, it was gone. But the goop was different; even after separating one's self from its all encompassing presence, the smell was still there, eliciting those same foul memories that he would have just as easily preferred

never to have had experienced in the first place, let alone remember so many years after.

But what could he do? It was his way of atonement for inadvertently causing the death of his sweet Lily. It was a punishment that had to be borne by him and him alone.

He hadn't told Albus about the extent of the horrors that arose for him from that smell, but he knew that the old man understood some of how the room affected him regardless. Albus was simply annoying like that; one needed not to tell the man what was going on inside his or her own heart, but rather how his or her actions were going to be affected as a result of one's internal state of being.

With a sigh that he would only permit himself to give voice to in the privacy of his own quarters, Severus stood up and made his way out the door to collect the dratted Potter brat. He had only turned the corner of the hallway when he saw the latter half of Potter's flinch and then become still once more.

When he was within ten paces of the Gryffindor, the boy turned and looked at him calmly from where he was crouched on the floor.

"Good evening professor," the lad nodded to him calmly.

The teenager's face was drawn and bloodless, but the boy's eyes were as clear as ever as they peered icily up at him.

He did not return the lad's pleasantries—but then again, why should he?

"It's time to adjourn for the evening. Leave your tools here. I shall escort you back to your dorm," he tersely informed the boy.

"Yes sir. Thank you for doing this, sir." Potter said, standing up after removing the protections from his hands and face, and putting them down next to where he had laid the tools, just outside the doorway proper.

"This?" He couldn't help but ask.

"Keeping me safe," was the mystifying answer.

Severus didn't have a proper reply for that, so he merely said nothing. Thus they spent the entire walk to the Gryffindor tower in silence, with only one exception. Shortly before arriving at the Fat Lady's portrait, Potter turned to him and spoke.

"Sir, what time should I report to the room in the morning?" The teen asked in a serious tone.

"Nine o'clock."

His words were met with a mild look of confusion, but they were not questioned. Against his better judgment he decided to explain anyways.

"The hour was pushed back so that you would have a chance to work on your homework."

"Thank you sir," Potter said with a nod of his head.

It had not been his idea, but he nodded back regardless. If the boy wanted to thank him, he would let him. He would not dissuade gratitude; especially not from this boy.

Just before the boy had shut the portrait, he called out to him with an admonishment that he would see him at breakfast or else. The Gryffindor fifth year had nodded before wishing him a pleasant evening.

He could not help but snort at the ludicrousness of the idea. He waited until the portrait door was closed and then took his leave of the tower. He debated with himself about whether he should wait for the boy just to sneak out again, but he decided in the end to leave that particular battle to Minerva.

Chapter Four – New Problems and Unexpected Difficulties

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Draco asked Blaise, as he flopped next to him on the couch in the Slytherin common room.

"Ah Draco; always so eloquent and subtle in all of your interactions," Blaise replied sarcastically.

The blond haired teen made an unpleasant face at him.

"I can afford to have an off day once in a while," Draco grouched.

"Then by your reasoning," Pansy said, wandering over into the conversation and depositing herself on the couch opposite them, "you've been having an off day every day so far this year."

"Who asked you?" Draco bitched at her.

"Me actually," Millicent stated covetously as she too wandered over and sat next to Pansy, flinging an arm around the other girl as she did so.

"Can we stop talking about me and turn the focus back on the mess that Blaise is slowly turning into before our eyes?" Draco said, turning everyone's eyes back to the boy who was now cradling his head in his hands in mortified embarrassment.

"Thanks a lot Draco," he muttered.

"No problem," Draco said with a sharp grin, slapping the other boy on the back as he did so.

"For real," Pansy said, sounding honestly worried.

Blaise looked up at her, the confusion clearly visible on his face.

"Why are you staring at me like that Blaise?" Pansy asked, scooting closer to her girlfriend.

"You sounded really human just then," he said, breaking into a grin as the two girls began scowling fiercely at him. From beside him, he heard Draco snort his opinion of the situation, and he leaned back satisfied.

Later, after the girls had departed off to do things he didn't really want to know much about, Draco turned to him, a concerned expression on his face.

"Okay, spill," he demanded seriously.

"Say again?" Blaise asked casually.

"What's wrong?" Draco asked, pushing past Blaise's denial easily.

"Nothing," Blaise said with a shrug, looking away from the piercing quality of the silver eyes that were now staring at the side of his face.

"Bullshit."

"Trust me; you don't want to know," Blaise said, still speaking calmly.

"You're my friend."

"I thought that you didn't have friends," Blaise said, turning back to look at Draco.

"I'm a dumbass."

"Can I have that in writing?" Blaise retorted, raising an eyebrow.

"Git," was the response.

"What made you change your mind?" Blaise asked.

"My father did, actually."

Blaise looked at Draco in surprise. Publicly, the Malfoys got along perfectly, as any high upstanding pureblood family ought to, but in private it was a different affair. Draco despised his father with a loathing almost as vehement as Blaise's own, although he was fairly positive that the reasons were not the same.

"How did he do that?" Blaise asked curiously.

"He said that he approved of my behavior."

Blaise looked at his friend in disbelief before snorting in amusement; the sound soon leading to full out giggles that he had trouble reigning in.

"Only you, Draco," he said breathlessly, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief carefully.

"Such is the life of a Malfoy," Draco answered smoothly, sending them both into long peals of laughter that time.

Finally they both calmed down, after getting the attention of nearly the entire common room during their impromptu laughing session.

"So as my friend, I can tell you what is bothering me without fear of reprisal, repercussions or being committed to the crazy ward over at St. Mungo's?" Blaise asked carefully.

Draco nodded seriously at him, his gray eyes never leaving Blaise's worried face.

"Let's go to your room. I don't want anyone accidentally overhearing anything," he said with a sneer around him.

Draco, being a prefect that year, was blessed with his own room, which also came with a bathroom. Blaise was more than a little envious; especially since he had gotten stuck with Theodore Nott as a roommate that year. Crabbe and Goyle's parents had taken them out of Hogwarts, and they were now supposedly attending Durmstrang. However, Blaise's contacts at that school had yet to actually see the two boys; meaning that while their locations were anyone's guess, it was still most likely that they had just joined the ranks of the Death Eaters.

The thought of which still made him sick to his stomach.

Ted was okay as a roommate, but the two of them weren't particularly close. They were, thankfully, both fairly studious individuals—something that made sense to Blaise, especially as they were still both there at Hogwarts.

Draco waved a hand towards one of his two armchairs and Blaise sat down while Draco did the same in the one opposite him.

"I became really close to someone over the summer, and now I'm worried about him."

"Him?" Draco repeated. "Friend or more?"

"Friend."

"Does he know this?" Draco asked in concern.

"Very much so," Blaise reassured him.

"Just checking," Draco said, raising his hands in defense of himself.

"Yeah." Blaise said quietly.

"So you're concerned about a friend from this summer," Draco prompted. "Why?"

"He's—," Blaise trailed off, looking at his hands. How could he break Harry's confidence like this?

"Do you want to swear me to a Wizard's Oath?" Draco interjected suddenly.

"Would you?" Blaise asked uncertainly.

"I swear on my magic that I will not speak of anything Blaise Zabini might tell me about his friend," the other boy said formally as a golden sheen lit the space between the two of them, before quickly disappearing; leaving Blaise with a much more secure feeling in his heart.

"He's got it really rough in his home," Blaise said, finally continuing his earlier thought. "He takes a lot of crap from his relatives, but it's more than just emotional and physical abuse. His guardian rapes him three or four times a week." Blaise told the grim faced teen across from him.

"Motherfucking bastard," Draco spat, while Blaise nodded his agreement.

"Not only that, but the fuckers starve him and beat him and generally work him to death; all while telling him he's worthless and how much better off they'd be if he were dead."

Blaise looked back up from the floor to see Draco staring at him with shock clearly etched across his face.

"Why doesn't he complain to someone?" The blond boy whispered.

"He's tried. People don't listen. They only see what they want to see. You know that," Blaise said with a bitter laugh.

"But," Draco said, running his hands through his hair, "fuck! That's just some sick twisted shit," he exclaimed emotionally.

"And you're the only one who he's been able to really tell about what's going on, right?" Draco added after another painful expanse of silence.

"Yeah," Blaise said, grunting another bark of laughter at the ironies of his life that continued to make themselves known. Blaise knew from his own experience that asking for help was just about the most terrifying thing you could do, especially when it came to being safe from sexual abuse in your own home. His mother took on lovers about as often as he changed shoe sizes; and for a teenage boy, that was pretty frequent.

Some of his "dads" had been bearable in nature, but others had stolen into his room late at night, intent on stealing his innocence away from him piece by piece until he felt like he was just a hollow shell instead of a real, breathing person.

And out of all people, Professor Snape had been the one to help him. He had noticed how Blaise couldn't seem to relax around other male teachers—including Snape himself. He also had noticed how Blaise had kept sleeping in the common room and how bad his night terrors were.

Professor Snape had noticed and he had helped.

In turn, Blaise felt like he ought to be able to help someone as well; which he had been doing fine with until the beginning of the school year. Somehow, seeing the results of the devastation from that

summer in his friend's changed face and demeanor had made it all come crashing back down on him, and he knew that he couldn't possibly hope to hold it all in on his own for another year.

It only made it worse knowing that he would get no help from Dumbledore, since it was the old man's fault that Harry was in that place to begin with. And as much as he liked and trusted his head of house, he knew that Snape would never listen to him regarding the seriousness of Harry's predicament. His issues with Potter senior simply ran too deep. Blaise knew that it would take some kind of life changing event to occur between the two of them before they ever got over their issues with one another—particularly in regards to Snape. Harry was willing to try, but Severus was another story altogether.

All of this frustrated him so much that he was the bearer of so much painful knowledge, and yet he still couldn't do anything about it!

"Would Severus be able to help the situation any?"

"Probably, if he wanted to," Blaise hitched a breath in.

"Why wouldn't he want to?" Draco's voice was hard, his eyes calculating.

Blaise knew that Draco saw Severus very much as a mentor and also as a father figure. To Draco, Severus could do anything, and if he couldn't—or wouldn't, as Blaise suspected would be the case here—then there had to be a very good reason for it.

"Well, for starters my friend isn't a Slytherin," Blaise stated tentatively.

"I didn't think he could be. Severus would have found out about a situation like that eons ago," Draco reasoned out, his eyes shining with admiration.

"But Severus would still help a student in trouble, regardless of house affiliation, provided that it wasn't Pot—," Draco trailed off as Blaise looked at him directly, before turning away with a hysterical laugh, his throat catching as he started to cry.

"Fuck." Draco said, realization dawning. He stood up and turned away, his hands crossed behind his head.

"FUCK!" He yelled at the wall, before dropping into silence only tempered with the sounds of Blaise's ragged breathing and occasional snuffles.

Draco turned back to his friend a few minutes later and pulled him out of his chair into a hug. Blaise really lost control then, and bawled like a baby instead of the fifteen year-old he was. Draco had taken on the problem. Draco could work miracles. Draco could fix things.

Blaise wasn't alone anymore.

"Well, Severus is always telling us that our point of view isn't the only right way of looking at the world," Draco whispered into Blaise's ear after he had calmed down enough to listen.

"I guess we'll just have to make Severus see that now, huh Blaise," Draco said, escorting the worn out boy to his room and even tucking him in.

"You are a good friend, Draco," Blaise said as Draco spelled off the lights and set the wards against anyone entering the room besides Ted.

Draco tipped an imaginary hat to him and grinned, but didn't say anything as he finally left Blaise to his own tired thoughts.

HS

Harry stood just inside the door to the Gryffindor tower with a thoughtful look upon his tired face. He knew that if he wanted to get a restful night, then he couldn't sleep in the tower. However, on the other hand, he knew that if he didn't want to get into any more trouble, or reduce Professor Snape's opinion of him any farther, then he'd have to stay in the tower.

Maybe I could do homework first and then sleep?

It wasn't the most pleasant of concepts. One of the things he needed to do soon was to perfect his use of wards to use to protect himself while he was unconscious. He'd have to see if he couldn't

grab a chance to speak with Blaise the next day—or as ludicrous as it sounded, maybe just write him a letter via owl. It seemed insane that even though they were technically at the same place, he still couldn't speak to him face to face.

And then a thought dawned on him, nearly causing him to laugh out loud with the relief of it. Thankfully, it was after midnight and the common room was already empty for once.

Probably because it's so early in the school year; people haven't gotten so behind on their homework yet as to need to stay up all hours of the day just to get it completed.

He quickly cast a scouring charm over himself first; lest he attract attention by the rank odor still emanating from his body and clothing. Speaking of clothing—he looked around once again to reassure himself that he was actually alone, before taking out his trunk and unshrinking it. He grabbed a set of clean clothes and quickly changed right there, before stuffing his dirty ones back in and pulling out his invisibility cloak.

He then shrunk his trunk once more, slipped it in his inner pocket, and put the cloak over his head. He took a moment to revel in the feeling that he was safe when he was invisible, before quickly looking for a spot out of the way that he could call his home for the night.

Ah, there, he thought with a grim smile of satisfaction as he spotted a far, out of the way corner away from both the girl's and the boy's staircases. He made his way over there—having to climb over an armchair in the process, before finally hunkering down on his side, his arms covering his mid-section protectively, with his back to the wall. He cast a few warming charms and the strongest silencing charms he knew, before setting an alarm to wake himself at five o'clock that morning.

It was just barely more than four hours of sleep, but he'd take what he could get if he knew that he could be safe while getting it.

Besides, a short restful sleep is better than a long worried one, he reasoned out to himself as he closed his eyes.

It wasn't long before he was completely unconscious.

HSHS

Severus wasn't expecting to be woken early the next morning by two of his Slytherin fifth years.

He especially wasn't expecting one of those fifth years to be his own beloved godson, but when he opened the door, that's who it was, along with an unusually dour looking Blaise Zabini.

"Come in boys," he said, looking curiously at them.

They were two of his better potions' students; particularly now, with so many of his upper years openly defecting to the Dark Lord's side by transferring to Durmstrang—something that he found himself blaming Albus for more and more as time went on.

After offering them tea—as was his custom for his colleagues and students of his own house—which they both accepted, they took seats and Severus asked them what was wrong.

For it was clear that something was wrong; something he could see in part from their expressions, and partially because neither boy—so far as he knew—had ever voluntarily been up before 6 in the morning.

He saw Draco glance at Blaise with a questioning expression, and he noted Blaise's subtle nod in the affirmative.

How odd it was for his godson to be looking to another student for permission, he mused to himself.

"We have a problem," Draco said, speaking slowly, moving his eyes back and forth between Blaise and himself.

"I would hardly think otherwise, given your faces."

His godson smirked a bit at that, but Blaise continued to glower darkly as though he hadn't even heard his head of house speak. It set Severus's gut on edge; something he tried to hide with another sip of tea.

Although he would never admit to having such, Blaise was one of his favorite students—apart from Draco, whom he had known for a far greater amount of time.

Blaise, for all of his deep and concerning home troubles, was typically a bright and energetic young man; seemingly intent on changing the world's opinion of Slytherins as dark and brooding future Death Eaters.

This complete turnabout in behavior reminded Severus greatly of an earlier time in Blaise's school career, when his demons had nearly become unmanageable. It had been that struggle which had brought them together initially.

If this situation was serious enough to warrant that kind of expression on his student's face, then he was prepared to be very worried indeed.

"Blaise made friends with someone outside of the Slytherin house at the end of last year." Draco continued, still speaking very deliberately. "And managed to keep up a correspondence with this friend all summer," the blond haired young man paused, looking at Blaise once again. And again, Severus saw Blaise give that small nod.

Severus couldn't help but be intrigued.

"Well," Draco paused, looking down at his tea, before setting it down on the small table in between them. "Blaise has learned some stuff about his friend's home life that has caused him to worry about his friend's safety there and now here as well."

"Is that true Blaise?" Severus asked, putting his now empty tea mug down as well, and turning to the black haired young man.

"It's a bloody understatement," Blaise muttered, before looking up at Severus apologetically.

"I'm sorry sir. Yes, it's true."

"No need for proper etiquette in here, remember?"

"Yes si—Severus," Blaise said with a small grim smile.

"Have you thought about going to this person's head of house?" Severus asked calmly.

"Thought about it, but I—well, neither of us thinks it will do any good," Blaise said, speaking again with no interruptions from Draco.

"Why not?"

Again, the two boys in front of him exchanged glances. He was beginning to wish that they'd just come out and say it, but he knew that they couldn't if they wanted to be careful about the student's identity.

"Because it's been going on for quite a while, and she—er—he or she has yet to do anything about it. Sorry Blaise," Draco said with a chagrined look. Blaise merely rolled his eyes and waved him off, before turning back to Severus.

She? The mystery student's head of house is female? Blaise made friends with a Hufflepuff or a Gryffindor?

Severus knew that his snakes made friends outside their own house from time to time, but rarely with either of the two houses mentioned, especially the latter.

"Would you classify the student's situation as an abusive one, Blaise?" Severus asked, his face becoming very serious.

Blaise laughed a hysterical sound, causing both Severus and Draco to peer at him in concern.

"He's trying to help, Blaise," Draco said soothingly, scooting close enough to Blaise to squeeze his shoulder gently.

Severus was very worried now; not only for the mystery student, but also for his own student. He knew that only very serious situations caused Blaise to react in such a way; usually indicating that Blaise felt the situation to be hopeless or too far out of control to be fixed.

"Draco is correct," he found himself murmuring softly to the increasingly distraught boy in front of him. "I need to know how

serious this situation is before becoming involved in another house's affairs."

Blaise put his head in his hands and rolled it from side to side.

"Would you help even if it turned out that you disliked this student?" He burst out suddenly, staring Severus in the eye with a piercingly hard glare.

"Abuse is abuse, Blaise. I should think you would know my feelings on that," he said, ignoring the sudden confusion that appeared on his godson's face.

Blaise looked away, staring at a spot on the far wall that presumably only he could see.

"It's abuse all right," he whispered, still staring intensely at that far spot. "Every kind possible, plus some," he continued quietly enough that Severus had strain to hear him, even though he was sitting within arm's reach of the boy.

"Every kind, Blaise?" Severus asked sharply, feeling sick to his stomach.

Blaise turned back to look straight into Severus's face.

"Every kind, Severus; including the worst kind," the boy spat out bitterly.

Severus sat back in his chair, steepling his fingers as he did so, and thought about what he had been told.

A student—in either Hufflepuff or Gryffindor—has been experiencing untold amounts of abuse for the past four years and no one has done anything about it. Plus, Blaise indicated sexual abuse of a serious level as well; so why has no one noticed?

It frustrated him to no end that either Minerva or Pomona had missed such an obvious case.

But you're also to blame. Blaise says that it is a student I dislike; could it be that I dislike this student enough to overlook the signs?

It made his stomach twist to consider that he might have put his personal feelings above the physical welfare of one of his students.

He was not a well-liked man, but was not bothered by that. However, he did pride himself on providing his students with the basic tools to succeed—if only they bothered to try—and one of those tools was allowing them all to grow up in safe environments.

"Damn," he muttered under his breath.

One of their most seriously abused students had gone on to become the Dark Lord; a monster hell bent on taking apart their world piece by piece. One Dark Lord was enough for Severus Snape; he wasn't sure if he could handle two such entities.

Across from him, while he had been thinking, he realized that his two fifth years had been discussing something intensely, given the flushed expressions on both their faces.

"Tell him who it is," Draco whispered to Blaise forcefully.

"None of this is going to matter when he finds out who it is. Come on Draco; you know how much he hates him," Blaise whispered pleadingly back.

Severus pondered that latest slip of information carefully. He couldn't think of a single boy—or girl for that matter—in Hufflepuff whom he despised enough to actually call it 'hate'. There were, however, more than a couple candidates for that description who resided in Gryffindor.

"Blaise, I had thought that you trusted me more than this," he said softly, breaking into their conversation.

Blaise looked chagrined at his words, but underlying that shame, Severus could see a wild desperation attempting to gnaw its way through Blaise's careful control of himself.

"Severus," Blaise said, his voice creaking ever so slightly, "I don't think that I can trust you with this. I'm the only one he trusts and has been able to tell. If you use the information only to make it worse for him, then I think—no, I know that it will push him over the edge. And then not only will you have failed him, but I'll have failed him too."

Blaise stood up, his hands clenched in fists.

"When you say that it 'will push him over the edge,' what do you mean precisely?" Severus asked, as he fought against his inclination to go and embrace the now trembling boy.

"He's not afraid of the consequences of his actions as it is already, Severus. His regular life is too horrible. If he loses what's left of his morality, he's going to start killing people," the boy forecasted; his eyes dark amongst the bitter emotions flickering across his face.

It was a serious judgment on his student's part; worse yet, he knew that Blaise was not one to idly make threats unless he had actually been given a reason—or more—to believe that such things were true.

"Severus," Draco interjected then, as he stood beside his friend. "He doesn't have anything left to lose," the boy said speaking very pointedly to him.

Severus made his decision and stood up, crossing the few steps over to where the two boys were still standing.

"Boys, sit down next to me, please."

It was a voice that allowed for no argument. The boys sat—one on each side of him.

"Provided that you are absolutely certain about the validity of these claims, then it behooves me and this mystery boy that I should listen to your concerns about him. I am the last of the Snape line, and I am glad of it. If the Dark Lord had not murdered my father, I likely would have taken the task on upon my own shoulders."

The boys didn't answer, but he could feel them each nodding next to him. Yes, they knew how one could come to feel such feelings about kin.

"What I'm about to say I had not planned on saying for some time—if ever—but I think that under the circumstances, it is appropriate. I think of you two as my family," he paused to allow the shock to sink in, and then continued. "If this is something that bothers you so very

much, then I will take it upon myself not to approach the situation in my typical manner towards this boy."

That was more emotional sentimentalism than he had expended in the past five years. He hoped that his boys appreciated it.

Apparently they did, as suddenly both boys had their arms around him—Blaise hugging him around the middle and Draco hanging onto his shoulders from the other side. All he could do was pat their shoulders awkwardly from the position he was in and wait for their individual storms to pass; so he could get on with his routine of saving the world from whatever tortured soul was disturbing the peace that week.

He scowled at himself for that ridiculous thought, but removed it from his face before the two fifth years sat up.

"My friend is a Gryffindor," Blaise started out softly, hugging himself tightly as he said the dreaded words.

Severus squeezed his shoulders in affirmation that he was prepared to handle the boy's next statement.

"Severus—it's Harry, Harry Potter."

Blaise looked at him with wide frightened eyes as the words sunk in.

Chapter Five – I Must Remember To Stay Calm

Harry bloody Potter?

Severus blinked and then gathered the boy next to him into a tight one-armed hug.

Blaise trembled violently next to his side for a full two minutes until he realized that Severus wasn't letting go.

"You aren't angry?" Came the whispered question directly into his ear.

"At you?"

A nod.

"Never," Severus said with emphasis.

"Will you help him?"

Severus, for all of his anger at Potter senior, had finally started to see that the dead man's son was not nearly the same kind of person. And this immense revolutionary shock that his boys had literally just dumped in his lap merely helped confirm that growing belief.

"Yes," he said in a deep voice a few moments later.

Draco smiled at him and at Blaise as well, but Blaise merely buried his head further into Severus's torso in an effort to soak up as much reassurance as he could get from the older man.

Severus smirked at him, suddenly amused with the image of a Blaise as a cat or perhaps as a niffler.

"Come boys," he said a bit later on. "You need to go off and get ready, so that in turn, I can get ready for what is likely to be a long and trying day."

"Bye Severus," they each said within moments of each other after he had walked them to the door. Blaise had not let go of him until the door had opened, leaving him and Draco smirking at one another in a shared moment of amusement.

And then he was alone, staring at the door while his mind dared to contemplate the monstrous changes he was going to have to make in just his thought processes alone.

Not to mention trying to figure out how to fix the whole damn thing.

Plus, he would also have to deal with Dumbledore at some point—how could a man that wise be so hideously obtuse?

For he didn't doubt the truth of what they had told him; there were very few in the world that he trusted more than the two boys that had just left. They were young, but they were not innocent to the horrors that the world possessed. They were a touch inexperienced, and more than a little wanting of acceptance and love from someone older than them, but they were not prone to making mistakes in terms of what they believed about the people around them.

If they believed that Harry bloody Potter was a victim of serious and ongoing abuse, then he was. It was as simple as that.

Now all he had to do was allow himself to see it as well.

Again his mind wandered back to an earlier thought: could it be that his dislike—or hatred as they had referred to it—had obscured the truth of the boy's suffering from him this entire time? And if that were true, then was it possible—or likely even—that the same was true for other students of his?

These thoughts weighed heavily on his mind as he finished his morning preparations—all the while seeking to develop some kind of action plan for how exactly he was to proceed with his relationship to the Potter boy now.

HS

Upon waking from his position in the corner of the common room, Harry had not stuck around, but instead quickly made his way out the door. He knew that the Quidditch team had a tendency to schedule insanely early practices, and he had no desire whatsoever to see anyone—in particular Ron.

The bastard, he added in his mind with no small amount of bitterness.

Since Professor Snape had insisted that he go to breakfast, he decided that he would just study there as well. True, it was only—he checked the time—twelve after five in the morning, but perhaps he wouldn't be the only one there at that time that morning; and if he was, well, then he could just say he was trying to get a jump start on the day.

Stop thinking; start moving; he admonished himself.

For a moment he feared that McGonagall might have done something idiotic like lock the portrait door against him, but it swung freely open like always, causing him to breathe a sigh of relief in return.

One obstacle down, he thought nervously.

He made it to the Great Hall in record time. He wasn't sure if he ought to be comforted by that or nervous that it had been that easy. Truthfully, he felt more of the latter, but the logical side of his brain wouldn't allow himself to give into that fear.

He sat down at the Gryffindor table at the farthest end from the head table. It was a section of the table that the first years usually sat at, and his choice for seating options was not accidental. He had had very little contact with the first years, and felt that it would be safer for all concerned if he sat with students whom he didn't have any prior history with.

Beyond just my legend, he thought with more than a little animosity.

Above him, the stars shone brightly alongside the moon. It was almost enough to see by, but not quite. However, before he had had a chance to do anything about the light situation, a lit candle materialized magically beside him. He jerked with its sudden appearance, but only slightly. He was trying to get that reaction under control, but the first month or so of the new school year was always hard.

And this year is the hardest so far.

The thought was a dark droplet in the bitter waters of the well of his heart. He thought back to that time on the train only a few days before, when he had been with Blaise. It had seemed that it had been the first time in a long time that he had actually smiled—actually laughed.

Would that ever happen again?

He took out his homework, and set to work, alone in the Great Hall with only a solitary candle for company.

I will always be alone.

It wasn't self-pity. It was truth. Did any of it matter anymore? Potions' homework did, in addition to his potions' class. And because his professor expected it of him, he tried to work on the rest of his homework as well.

HSHS

Ronald Weasley had reached a new point in his development that previous summer. He thought of it as his "Fuck With Everyone" stage. He smiled at the thought as he lay in his bed, cradling Hermione's naked body close to his own. She was asleep.

Of course she is.

He had drugged her evening snack and snuck her up to his bed for the night.

She wouldn't spend the night with him, but she at least would let him fuck her.

And now she did both.

He smiled.

He was very satisfied with their relationship. He was very satisfied indeed. He had taken her from behind that evening while she had lain unconscious beneath him.

She had bled and he had come from the sight of her blood on his dick and hands. It was even on her thighs, and he loved her for it. He would heal her before the next morning—or perhaps he wouldn't.

Wouldn't that be fun?

No, he had to heal her. He could get away with that kind of behavior later, when she no longer questioned her total obedience to his will, but for now, he had to preserve the illusion.

The drug wouldn't wear off for another hour.

He looked at her mouth thoughtfully before making his decision.

It was a wonderful decision.

He didn't come in her mouth for fear of her choking. He came in her hair and on her beautiful perky breasts. He might have convinced himself to heal her ass, but he knew he wouldn't heal the bite marks that were plentiful on and around her nipples. Maybe he wouldn't heal the marks on her thighs either. It was a heady thought; causing him to become hard once more even though he had just come.

He drew her body closer to his own and fondled her luscious depths before inserting himself and pounding her deep into the mattress.

She was like a goddess in this state. She was his goddess. The only thing he had missed while she had been in this state had been her screams.

They were the stuff of his dreams.

HSHSHS

"Is it okay if I sit here?" A small voice at his right elbow asked tremulously.

He looked up, surprised that the entire hall was now lit. He had really gotten into his essay and hadn't even noticed the appearance of the breakfast dishes which now surrounded him.

He looked down and saw a tiny first year Gryffindor student standing there with a backpack nearly the same size.

Barely aware of it, his face cracked a grin and he gestured at the seat beside him.

"Sure."

"Thanks," the boy said, carefully putting his bag under the bench and climbing up.

Were we that small? Surely not; he scoffed at himself.

Only a few minutes more had passed before the question was asked again—this time from across the table by a little girl, although not quite as small as the first boy had been.

He nodded, giving the same answer.

After the third time it had been asked—diagonally from a boy the same size as the girl—he decided to give up on his homework and actually try to eat something.

Soon after he made that decision, he abruptly became surrounded by at least five or six of them.

"You're all first years?" He asked curiously.

They nodded in the affirmative, looking at him with wide eyes.

"What're your names?" He asked, and got several looks of surprise in return.

"Why do you want to know?" One boy asked bravely.

"Cause you're Gryffindors and I don't know you yet," he said, leaning forwards a bit.

"Really, Richie!" The girl across from him chided. "Do you have to be so paranoid all of the time? This is Harry Potter!" She said, emphasizing his last name in a way that almost made him want to get up and never come back.

But he restrained himself. They didn't know any better. Maybe he could teach them.

And then if that doesn't work, I'll go with my first impulse, he thought soothingly to himself.

"Hey, Richie?" He said, turning to the suspicious boy. "I apologize for using your first name, but if I knew your last, I'd use it. 'Kay?" He received a stiff nod in return.

"It's Mondon," the boy said tersely.

"Okay. Mondon. And you are?" He said, turning to the girl who had spoken out against Mondon.

"Cynthia Nott," she said with a sniff at the boy beside her.

"Nott—is your brother—?" He asked hesitantly.

"Yes. He's a Slytherin fifth year. Dad was in Slytherin, but Mum was in Ravenclaw," she said very smoothly, keeping her face free of any leading emotions.

"Cool," he said, getting those same looks of surprise once more. "I was almost put in Slytherin myself," he said, readying himself for the shock.

He was not disappointed.

He answered their questions easily—no he was not a dark wizard. No—Slytherin was not the house of evil, and no that didn't mean that 'all Slytherins were nice'—and so on. It was almost amusing.

"And listen guys—and girls," he said with a nod to Cynthia and another little girl named Melissa McDunham.

"I might be Harry Potter, but I'm not the Harry Potter," he said, glancing at Mondon as he spoke. "I'm not someone who leads an awesome life, and I don't come by my successes in life easily. In fact, if you want to know the truth, here it is. Dumbledore sent me to my only living relatives after my parents were killed by Voldemort," he paused for the gasps before continuing.

"I know that the last bit is pretty common knowledge, but what most people don't seem to understand is that my muggle relatives

despise magic, and my mother's sister despised my mum. So you know what that means?" He looked around at the quiet first years flanking him; a few were nodding, but the rest seemed to be more or less confused. It intrigued him that both Mondon and Cynthia had nodded in understanding.

"It means that they hate me and wish that I had never been born. Furthermore," he said, pushing past the resultant gasps, "not only have my relatives sought to beat and work the magic out of me, but they also make sure to remind me as often as possible about how worthless and lousy I am. I didn't even know I was a wizard until I got my letter from Hogwarts."

He got nods from different faces that time; leading him to assume them to be muggleborns. It was a known fact that the Nott family was a pure blood family, and although he hadn't heard of the surname "Mondon," the boy's robes were of good quality, possibly even hand-tailored; indicating that the family he hailed from was well off, at the very least.

"So if you're going to judge someone, do it on their own personal history and not on rumors about them, or worse yet, their family's reputation," he said, eyeballing each of them with that last statement.

"Got me?" He asked.

Silent nods were his only response. After that pronouncement and subsequent warning, the remainder of breakfast was rather subdued.

HSHSHS

Severus Snape casually—for him—looked at the Gryffindor table that morning, only to have to look again to confirm that what he had seen was real.

A perplexed feeling came across him as he realized that Pott—erm, no he had to start thinking of him as Harry now, damn it—was sitting with, and talking to only the Gryffindor first years.

Could Po—Harry be scheming something that needed their involvement?

It seemed rather unlikely; yet he had already completely fouled up his perception of the boy's character—what was to say he could actually correctly judge anything else about him?

"Are you not at all worried that one of your fifth years has decided to change social groups?" He asked, turning to Minerva.

She looked up startled, before turning back to him with an icy expression on her face.

"I'll remind you that he is still my student, Severus."

He sneered at her. Had she already forgotten yesterday?

"Given that I am now in charge of his discipline, I thought that it would be important for me to be aware of his behaviors, as well as any changes in those routines," he replied in a cold voice.

"If you must know then, Severus," Minerva said with a very distinct sniff of disdain towards him; "Mr. Potter sent Mr. Ronald Weasley to the infirmary not two days ago after they got into a bit of a scuffle."

"And you're just now telling me this?"

"Oh Severus; they're just boys. They do this sort of thing all of the time. It will blow over soon enough," she answered with a stiff glare.

"And if it does not?"

"Hopefully he will learn to mind his temper after spending two weeks with you and your detention."

Why is she not answering my question?

"What is Mr. Weasley's position on why the fight occurred?"

"Says that Mr. Potter attacked him from behind."

"Did you believe him?"

She fixed him with another hard look with that question.

"As a matter of fact, no, I did not entirely."

"And your reasoning was—?"

"The students who heard the fight said that they were yelling at one another initially—although no one could tell me the words that were said."

"So it was only after the argument that they heard actual fighting?"

"It seems that way to me, yes."

"What has Mr. Weasley's behavior been like this year, beyond that?" He asked curiously.

"As far as I can tell, he never leaves his girlfriend's side. That would be Miss Granger, if you haven't kept up."

"I have little reason to try and keep up with the social circles of our students."

"Except for Mr. Potter," she said with a pointed look at him.

"Because I am now involved with his case, and I would like to know if he is about to go over the edge before it happens." He answered her flatly.

"Honestly, Potter is one of the more stable students this school has, Severus."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I have seen no reason not to. Now if you will excuse me, I must go and finish preparing my classroom for my morning class. As you well know, the 3rd year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws do tend to get a bit anxious when their routines are disrupted."

He nodded at her, but remained silent as she left the table.

Looking back to the table, he noted with some distaste? Worry?—that the Gryffindor first year students were still staring at P—Harry with something akin to awe written on their faces.

On the other hand, the boy himself looked positively hostile. He wondered what he was telling them, and whether or not it would cause any problems for anyone—namely himself—that day.

It was entirely too likely a scenario—causing him to sigh internally as he got up and went out the door to the start of his own day.

HSHSHSHS

Harry wasn't sure what started the fight; all he knew is that it was between the Gryffindor and the Slytherin first years.

If he found it odd that he should be standing in the midst of a crowd of almost midgets waving sticks of wood at one another, then he didn't let on to anyone—not even to himself.

He also wasn't too surprised to find out that one of the boys involved was Richard "Richie" Mondon. The boy's attitude was unpleasant, and was tempered by a mood about two shades darker than the night of a new moon.

Standing opposite of Mondon and a half dozen Gryffindors, was nearly an exact replica of first year Slytherin students—both groups scowling fiercely at one another as though they had hopes to set each other on fire with just the intensity of their glares.

"Okay, what happened?" He demanded in an even, but icy sounding voice. Chaos reasserted itself around him and he quickly silenced the unruly group around him with a few well-placed glares at the louder individuals amongst the two groups.

He turned to the group of Slytherins, holding up a hand to his own house as he did so.

"What happened?" He asked tersely; well aware that they were drawing a crowd of other students around them. He knew that it was only a matter of time before a teacher got involved—or Merlin forbid, Dumbledore. He had to figure their problem out soon.

The answer he got from the young Slytherins was succinct and to the point. Two of their own had been pushed roughly from behind, apparently as a purposeful action. They had turned around and seen

a Gryffindor boy right behind them with his wand out and a smug expression upon his face. When he asked, both of the Slytherins in question pointed their fingers at Mondon.

"Did anyone see Mondon actually do it?" He asked, getting sneers from the Slytherins and avoidant looks from the Gryffindors.

Fine, he thought with an angry mental huff. If they want to be embarrassed, then they can do it on their own.

"Mondon, let me see your wand," he said in a low voice, getting an angry squawk from the small boy opposite him. He did not miss the looks of surprise that passed briefly over the faces of the Slytherin first years either.

"Do it," he said in a voice that allowed for no arguments; staring the small boy down with a frightful expression on his voice.

The other boy swallowed and then handed it over to Harry.

Harry well remembered the event with Winky in the woods following the Quidditch World Cup before the beginning of his fourth year. He ordered the wand to give up its secrets via Prior Incantatem, and then they watched as a miniature scene played out before them, detailing the previous events of that hallway's confrontation.

Harry swallowed inaudibly as he and the others watched Mondon's curse strike the two Slytherins from behind, nearly cracking their skulls on the stone floor as they were thrown forwards.

The wand finished its recitation and he and those around him looked back up to Mondon's now extremely pale face staring angrily back at them from the midst of the quickly separating Gryffindor first years.

"No you don't!" He yelled at those Gryffindors.

"If you're going to lie for him, then you better damn well take responsibility for him too!" He growled as he began pacing back and forth in front of them.

"You don't bail on a house member ever. We take responsibility for this as a whole, and as a whole we will deal with this situation," he said through gritted teeth, finally stopping his movements and

staring down at the younger years with an unchanging look of determination.

He looked up towards the crowd then, his eyes searching for the familiar face that he thought he had seen only moments before that.

"Blaise Zabini! May I obtain your assistance please?" He called out in a ringing voice towards the fifth year Slytherin boy. Around him the crowd broke into surprised whispers, while the two groups around him continued to watch the proceedings in tense and unbroken silence.

"What can I do for you Harry?" Blaise said, stepping through to the middle of the throng with ease.

"How much did you see?" Harry asked his friend, dropping his voice into a much quieter level.

"Everything but the initial event," was the equally soft reply back.

"Can you take your house's youngin's to the infirmary to be checked out Poppy?" He asked quietly, his eyes focused firmly on Mondon and the surrounding Gryffindors—whom he was glad to see now had their wands trained firmly on their idiot year mate.

They might not be able to do anything with those wands, but by Merlin, they are at least trying to make sure nothing else happens—especially not in front of so many witnesses!

"Sure Harry. What about you?" Blaise asked, catching Harry's attention with his inquisitive and searching brown eyes.

"We're going to have a chat with the deputy headmistress," he answered with a grim look in his face.

"You're doing a good thing here, Harry," Blaise said with an earnest expression on his face. "No one ever sticks up for the Slytherins—especially the younger years—and now look at you, the big Gryffindor going out to find justice for us. Snape will appreciate this."

Harry cracked half of a smile at him and then turned his face back to a harder look as he prepared himself for what was about to occur.

HS HSHSHSHSHS

Severus did not normally get fire-called to the headmaster's office in the middle of his sixth year NEWTs level class, because typically his employer understood the dangerousness of leaving such students alone in the middle of brewing. However, if the case was serious enough, then it had to be done.

And if the interruption was a result of one of his snakes being hurt, then it damn well had better be done.

After finishing the conversation and hearing those dreaded words alongside the word "attacked," Severus wasted no time in coming to a quick decision regarding his morning class.

He ordered them to cast stasis spells on their cauldrons—all except Ms. Velman's, which he went ahead and banished immediately—and then added that they were to clean up their stations as well.

Then he left; his long legs taking him quickly to Albus's office, where he found not only the headmaster, but also Minerva, a small Gryffindor boy, and Blaise Zabini standing with each of his hands protectively atop one of the shoulders of two of his first years. They both looked shaken and bit frightened, but no worse for wear, given that Poppy had seen them beforehand.

Of course he inquired about that first, and quickly had those fears dispelled. For his own peace of mind he looked over them himself as well, before deciding to side with Poppy's opinion that they were safe to go to sleep in their own beds. Thus followed a quiet exchange of words with Albus; after which he directed Blaise to take the two boys down to their dorms and put them to bed with a few half doses of dreamless sleep. He also made sure to assure them both that they were not in any trouble whatsoever, going so far as to gently pat them on their backs as they walked to and out the door.

He exchanged a concerned look with Blaise, and received a nod in reply; assuring him that Blaise would take good care of them for the remainder of the day, and excusing him from his classes in turn.

Following their exit, he found that without the worry of his smallest students' health to distract him, his fiery anger began to fight to be

released; preferably on the imbecile that dared imply anything regarding fault in the situation itself.

And since he very much doubted the involvement of Minerva or Albus in such an idiotic ploy, he turned his eyes to the only other possible suspect: the small Gryffindor boy who was still glaring angrily at the floor.

"I will assume that the one at fault is the barely cognizant slug sitting before me, correct?" He asked coldly of Albus.

"Mr. Mondon's guilt has been confirmed, yes," Albus answered him.

"Were there witnesses?"

"Not exactly," Albus said peculiarly.

Severus raised an exasperated eyebrow at the infuriating man in a silent plea for him to explain before he lost his careful control of himself.

The story which followed was almost unreal enough to make him question his own sanity, had he not seen firsthand the changes that past summer had wrought in the fifth year Gryffindor boy. He also found himself thinking about Blaise and Draco's words of warning regarding young Harry as well.

"And Mr. Zabini confirms this account too?" He asked, still feeling somewhat unsettled with the changing realities of his world.

"He did indeed," Albus responded solemnly. Severus was aware that Albus's focus was no longer on him, but instead had been redirected towards the small unhappy figure perched on the chair next to Minerva.

"Before we decide on Mr. Mondon's fate, I would like to ask him a question," Minerva interjected in the space that followed Albus's last statement.

Albus waved her on with an unreadable expression.

"Mr. Mondon," she began sternly, only to stop as the boy continued to stare resolutely at the floor.

"You will look at me when I am speaking to you young man. Do you understand me?" She asked in a cold voice.

The boy shrugged but picked his head up and focused a dead-eyed glare more or less in the vicinity of her face.

"Answer her," Severus told him with a commanding tone, his eyes glinting dangerously.

If he had frightened the boy, it wasn't obvious to anyone but the boy himself. Nonetheless, his request worked, for shortly after that, the boy muttered a "Yes sir," which was quickly followed up with a "Yes ma'am."

"I want to know why you did what you did," Minerva said quietly, looking at him solemnly.

"Does my answer affect my status as a student?" The boy asked, turning to Albus with a very Slytherin look about his eyes.

Albus exchanged a glance with Severus—one to which he found himself reluctantly nodding at.

"Possibly it might, Mr. Mondon; possibly it might," Albus answered the boy with a speculative look over the top of his glasses at him.

Mondon sighed a bit and then turned back to look at Minerva as he had been instructed to do so previously.

"I was supposed to be in Slytherin," he answered in a dull monotone.

"How so?" Severus found himself asking.

"Everyone in my family that has ever gone here has always been in Slytherin," the boy said, turning to look at the older man with that same unchanging expression.

"Except you," Severus replied, intrigued despite his locked deadpan expression.

"Except me," the boy said, turning his head to look away, as though ashamed.

"And why do you suppose that you were not placed there?" Severus asked evenly.

"Because earlier that evening I saw something that changed my mind," the boy said with a small smirk—which he wiped off his face before turning back to look at Severus.

"Explain."

The boy turned back to McGonagall even though Severus had been the one to make the demand.

"Because I saw who pranked Draco Malfoy."

Severus saw Albus raise an interested eyebrow, but otherwise remained silent.

"Would you care to elucidate that statement Mr. Mordon?" Minerva asked.

"I won't tell you the name, but I will tell you this: they weren't in Slytherin," the boy said, crossing his arms and leaning back a bit. He turned back to look at Severus as he did so, looking at him with the barest hint of a pleased expression on his face.

"And so?" Minerva asked, even as Severus's mind began to form the beginnings of an understanding towards the boy's way of thinking.

"The person that I saw maneuvered himself into Malfoy's vicinity, and slipped the object into his pocket in front of a crowd of witnesses," he said with particular emphasis on the last part of his sentence.

"It was a perfectly cunning move, but yet it was perpetrated by someone in a house that is not at all known for cunning or slyness!" The boy exclaimed, nearly jumping up from the chair in his fervor.

"And this led you to believe what exactly," Severus prompted.

"How Slytherin is it to officially be announced before the school as one?" The boy asked him with cold calculating eyes.

"You mean to say—," Minerva asked, cutting off as she understood what the boy was saying.

"A very Slytherin plot," Severus admitted.

"The ultimate Slytherin plot," Mondon corrected him, a fierce determination now blazing in the boy's eyes.

"Intriguing," the headmaster put in then; staring at the boy with a thoughtful look on his face.

"You managed to argue the hat out of putting you where you belonged, somehow justifying both your plan and the hat's own decision as you did so," Albus said, laying it out in full before them all.

A short nod from the boy was what he got for trouble.

"And yet you still haven't answered the original question; a very evasive action on your part," Albus added.

"Perhaps I just hadn't gotten there yet," the lad murmured coolly.

"Then by all means, continue," Severus answered snidely, crossing his legs with a well directed glare.

"The two that were in here before—," Mondon started before being interrupted by Severus.

"The two that you unjustly attacked from behind," Severus said darkly.

"—Are cousins of mine," Mondon finished calmly. "Worthless specimens who wouldn't know how to properly scheme even if someone wrote out a guide for them," he continued angrily while bravely continuing to ignore Severus's increased glower at the debasing comments he had made towards his two Snakes.

"And your point?" Minerva asked then, not looking particularly pleased either.

"And my point is this: If you're going to plan or discuss attacking someone later in class, then you ought not to do so loud enough for your voice to be picked up by those passing by!" The boy argued hotly.

Planning for an attack?

"For whom was this conversation directed towards?" Severus asked.

"And how do we know that you're speaking the truth?" Minerva added.

The boy sent him an exasperated look, but didn't dare try the same look on her.

Severus wasn't sure whether the small quasi-Gryffindor was hoping to amuse or insult him with that knowing glance; either way, he ignored it without even an acknowledgement that it had occurred.

"I'm sure Professors Snape and Dumbledore will have no problem ascertaining the honesty of my words. As for the attack itself, they were discussing me and Cynthia Nott."

"So you attacked first," Dumbledore mused aloud, a smile twitching on his lips.

Severus watched Albus stand and wander to the window to look out. He knew that Albus was probably just using that as an excuse to think through an idea without the rest of the room watching.

"Yes. Sir," the boy answered in an annoyed voice.

"Perhaps the Sorting Hat pulled one on you as well," the headmaster muttered, speaking in a voice that was barely audible even for Severus, as he came back over to where they were sitting.

"Plots within plots," Minerva groused, rubbing a hand over her face tiredly. "It's too early in the day for this."

"Yes, the next time you decide to attack one of your classmates, please do it after at least nine o'clock in the morning," Albus told him with a smile directed towards the Gryffindor head of house.

"The next time, sir?" The boy asked, picking up on the phrasing quickly.

"Or better yet, inform someone else and leave the attacking out of your schedule entirely," Severus said with a sneer.

"Yes sir," the boy answered with a confused look towards each of them.

"So are we done here then?" The boy asked carefully.

Severus was privately amused when Albus laughed at the child's question.

"Done? No, I should say not. There is still the question of solving the question of your punishments," Albus said.

In the end, it was a much more subdued Gryffindor first year that left the headmaster's office. Minerva followed him less than a minute later, saying something to the effect of her making sure the young man actually got where he was supposed to be.

Severus looked at Albus when they were finally alone, and allowed himself to smirk at the fully twinkling visage of the old man sitting across the desk from him.

"I have little doubt that you discuss each of the Sorting Hat's decisions with it after each and every ceremony," he told the amused older man in front of him.

"The boy is misinformed on his family history," Albus replied.

"Hmm?"

"They wouldn't have mentioned this to him of course, but I have it on good authority that his great aunt 'Pennie' was a Hufflepuff."

At Severus's raised eyebrow, Albus continued.

"Really my dear boy, if you think about it, Slytherins and Hufflepuffs aren't so very different."

That time he couldn't help it. He scoffed aloud at the man.

"Loyalty to one's family can take on many identities, Severus," Albus said in a far more serious tone.

"I suppose," he answered begrudgingly.

"So old man, did you go to school with his great aunt?" Severus asked with a raised eyebrow.

"What do you think?"

"I would think you would know better than to ask that question by now."

"Well, then you have your answer as well," Albus said a faint smile.

Severus snorted as he got up and left the old man to his own business.

After all, he still had yet to see if his classroom was still standing. The unexpected situation had completely taken over his morning, causing him to miss his second class altogether. He found himself both oddly relieved and strangely annoyed about cancellation of that class; especially since it would have been his fifth year Gryffindor – Slytherin one, and he had planned on speaking to Harry afterwards.

Now he would be forced to go and search the boy out on purpose.

It annoyed him, to say the least.

Chapter Six – Taking Responsibility

When Harry found out that his Potions class for that morning was cancelled, he wasn't sure whether to be happy or bothered by it.

Looking at the endless sea of crud before him, he opted for annoyed. At least if he were in class, he could be sitting in a bloody chair instead of slowly grinding his knees down to nubs.

Meh, his inner voice told him apathetically.

Well, at least missing class meant that he didn't have to deal with Ron again. It seemed more likely than ever before that they were heading towards a serious confrontation sometime in the near future.

Certainly the Mondon thing from this morning has reached him by now, he thought darkly to himself.

Ron had always had a thing about Slytherins, and he didn't think it likely that the red haired prat would be too happy about hearing how a fellow Gryffindor had stood up one of them, and against one of their own in the process.

The whole thing was idiotic.

That's what bothered him the most; the sheer pointlessness of the entire issue itself.

If Weasley was itching for a fight, then he'd give it to him. Although, he did hope that poor ickle Ronniekins would at least try to fight back the next time they went at it.

As he remembered from his uncle's bouts of outrageous anger, it really wasn't as fun to hurt someone who never tried to fight back.

HS

Ron hadn't trusted Harry since their third year. He knew that Harry had been keeping things from him for a while, but until recently, he hadn't been aware of exactly how many things he didn't know about his supposed best mate. As though it hadn't been bad enough to know that Harry had been withholding certain truths from him, it had

become just that much worse when he had learned that the other boy had actually been outright lying to him.

For all intents and purposes he had outwardly forgiven him for getting involved with the Tri-Wizard cup, because he figured that Harry had only been trying to protect them from the competition's inherent dangers. Okay, he got that.

He had started to read up on human psychology early his fourth year; initially in hopes that the books could give him another way of beating his chess opponents. From there, he realized that chess was really just metaphor for life, and that understanding one's opponent for any situation could potentially give him a leg up.

That small beginning had soon opened his mind to other concepts, other ideas, and soon he found himself analyzing not only his opponents, but also their enemies—Voldemort and the like—and then, his friends as well.

He looked at the way that Harry was always getting hurt, always putting himself in between danger and his friends. Harry wasn't particularly careful with how he made his decisions and exercised his plans, but Ron was. Harry was testing fate, and like any other strategist, Ron knew that there would soon be a day in which fate bit back—and likely with a vengeance.

So the question ultimately came down to asking himself why it was that Harry reacted in such stupid ways? He knew better than most that the Dursley's didn't particularly care for Harry, but he hadn't been altogether sure of how serious the situation was until he had really put some thought into it.

For all of his friend's bravery, Harry was oddly . . . shy about certain things like say, changing clothes in front of people before and after their Quidditch matches. He was shy about the opposite sex, and he never joined in on their conversations in the dorms late at night about what they'd really like to do with whichever girl their sights were currently set on for that week or month.

Putting together all of what he knew about his friend, and all that he had surmised on his own, Ron had come to the conclusion that Harry was not only being treated like dirt by his relatives, but that he was also being sexually abused as well.

All of the reports that he had read—or overheard—from his parent's conversations late at night, had led him to believe that the Dark Lord had likely been abused in a similar manner from the orphanage patrons he had been at the mercy of during his younger years.

But finally he had also learned something of even greater value towards the end of that previous summer from Harry's very own godfather. Of course, as Ron reflected on his memories, Sirius didn't actually remember that conversation, but he didn't really give a damn, all considered.

He had had suspicions of Sirius from the start, ever since that fateful night in the dorm during their third year. He hadn't mentioned the sense of unease he got when around the ex-convict to Harry, but he hadn't been able to shake the feeling either. And he knew—he knew that Harry's longing for Sirius to take him away from that abominable Muggle family that he had been stuck with was enough to make his mate blind to some of the more obvious truths about the man himself.

For instance, Harry had been completely oblivious to the infatuation that Sirius had clearly had with James when they were school chums. He had overheard more than a few conversations between Sirius and Remus to ascertain the knowledge; a few of which were suspicious enough to make him wonder if Remus hadn't actually staged the conversations in the hopes that Harry would stumble across them, and in turn, save the old werewolf the emotional pain of simply speaking with him.

Everyone said that Harry looked just like James had, and Ron had seen enough pictures to believe that there was more than a little truth to those statements. Was it possible that after so many years of insanity in Azkaban, Sirius possibly might have actually gotten confused between the two Potter men?

Sirius couldn't have known that Percy had a small amount of Veritaserum on hand from his dealings in the Ministry following the whole Barty Crouch fiasco, but Ron knew, and he decided to use it upon learning that Sirius was being housed in the Grimwald house for the remainder of the summer.

If it had been during the school year, Ron could have stolen it right out from under Percy's snooping nose and then obliviated Sirius afterwards himself. At least, that had been his initial idea, before he remembered how tight the controls were on underage wizards. Plus, as he continued to dwell on the concept, an almost fifth year Hogwarts student shouldn't even be capable of wielding obliviate in the first place, let alone a Weasley. He feared it far too likely that someone would investigate that, and then that would probably lead to an investigation of his father.

That meant one thing: he needed someone to do the obliviate for him, and he needed some kind of insurance to make them keep quiet about it afterwards. If he were a richer boy, like say Harry, he thought with a sour roll of his eyes, he could simply bribe them into doing it. Although—as he decided later on—that wasn't entirely reliable either.

No, what he had needed was some kind of incentive for that person to do his will, and with that in mind, he had known exactly who to ask for help.

"Percy," he said, sticking his head into his brother's room one day late that previous summer.

"I swear Ron, if you don't grow up enough to learn how to knock, I'm going to curse you so hard that your teeth will shoot out of your arse, get me?" Percy had glared at him impressively after his rant, but Ron hadn't been afraid.

Instead, he had merely strolled in nonchalantly and shut the door behind himself quietly.

He knew his brother had silencing charms set to engage when the door was shut, so he wasn't worried about that part at all.

"I need your help." He stated.

"Why the fuck should I care?" His brother spat at him with a sneer almost as good as a Slytherin's.

"Because if you don't help me, I'll tell everyone what you've been doing," he said, crossing his arms in an almost identical pose to his increasingly irate looking brother.

"And what do you think it is that I've been doing?" Percy asked him in a low voice.

"Not what, but whom, oh dearest brother," Ron had snarled back.

"Dad already knows about Penelope," was the derisive response.

"Not her," Ron said with a nasty smile.

Something in Percy's eyes shifted, but the rest of his pose remained the same.

"There isn't anyone else," Percy spoke to him as though he were a very small child.

"I've got one word for you: Ginny."

Percy had impressed him further by not reacting to the bait.

"You are seriously deluded Ron. Why are you trying to insult me with such tripe?" Percy asked with a haughty air before flouncing back on his bed and leaning his back against the wall.

"Thursday night. June twenty-fourth. Mum and Dad had gone to a social gathering. The twins were visiting Lee Jordan. Do these words ring any bells for you?"

"I remember that day. What's your point?" Percy's voice was carefully neutral.

"I woke up halfway through the night, needing to take a piss. You and Ginny were the only other ones left in the house. On my way back from the loo, I heard a noise and went to investigate. She was crying and you were still breathing hard. Need I continue?" Ron asked in a hard voice.

"She'd had a nightmare. I heard her and came running. What's the big deal?" Percy shrugged at him casually.

"Oh she'd had a nightmare all right, oh wise brother of mine; and you were the central figure in it," he added with a glare of his own.

Percy just stared at him coldly.

"You fucked our little sister. I saw you."

"Let's say that you are telling the truth, Ron. What's to stop me from obliterating you right here and now?" Percy's voice was smooth and syrupy sounding.

"You obliterate me and I'll still remember from the copious notes that I have hidden in various places to myself. Oh, plus there's that letter that will be sent out unless I have the memory necessary to cancel it."

Percy's face had begun losing color during his explanation, but after that last sentence, he noted with some pride that his brother's face had gone completely white.

He gave his brother a moment to contemplate his words and then prompted him for a response.

"Well?" He asked.

"What kind of help did you say you needed?" Was Percy's reluctant reply.

And so they had become partners of a sort.

HSHS

Hermione couldn't believe the news that was wildly circulating in the common room late that same afternoon.

She knew from personal experience that it didn't take much to set Ron off, and frankly, she was more than a bit worried about his potential reaction when he heard this news.

Her chest still ached fiercely from where Ron had mouthed his affections during the last time they had had sex. Perhaps it was because of that ever present pain in her flesh that made her so much more fearful about her boyfriend's next actions over hearing that Harry had defended two Slytherins at the cost of a Gryffindor.

After all, if the pain in her body was there because of his love for her, then how might he act if he were to get really pissed off at someone?

He could hurt them badly, a small voice said in her mind bravely.

She told it to hush, which it did, but not before giving her a look that clearly said it thought she was slowly getting in over her head.

Well, if Ron starts to get out of control, then I can surely help to deflect some of that extra energy to something a bit more productive, she thought with a naughty edge to her smile.

She was well aware that her boyfriend had his faults, but she thought that as a smart girl—and a witch to boot—she should be able to respond to those faults in a logical way that somehow made things better. Ron didn't need to be fixed; he just needed to have his fears and resultant anger assuaged.

And really, Harry had no business putting himself in the middle of that debacle. He wasn't even a prefect, she thought with some annoyance. He had clearly overstepped his bounds as a student, and if Ron wanted to bitch to her about that, then she could go along with it easily. Dumbledore had chosen her and Ron over Harry because he thought that they were better for the job, hadn't he?

Harry just wasn't used to not being in the spotlight. She knew that he hated being singled out, but she supposed that after so many years of living with the wrong kind of self-image and expectations from those around him, it was only natural for him to try to continue on like he always had.

These were the thoughts that she was mulling over and trying to turn into a proper argument for Ron to be distracted with when her boyfriend finally found her in the common room that evening.

"Hey baby," he said, dropping next to her with a chaste kiss to her cheek.

She giggled at his simple sweetness and then returned the action.

"How are you doing tonight?" He asked her, surprising her slightly that he should be so openly interested in how her day had gone.

See, I am rubbing off on him! She told her inner voice with in a defensive voice.

And since he had been so thoughtful as to ask her, she decided to give him a topic that they could both really sink their teeth into—a thought which should have bothered her, but one that she found she couldn't focus on thanks to the close proximity of his body to her own.

"Annoyed," she answered haughtily, her temper shining brightly in her eyes.

"About Potter?" He asked—quite astutely, she thought with no small amount of pride.

"Yes. He's really overstepped his role as just another student this time. We are the prefects. He is not. And I think after so many years of being paid more attention to than what is healthy, he has developed the idea that he is supposed to fix everything," she answered hotly; flushing suddenly as she realized that Ron was now staring at her with a new level of respect.

"Exactly!" He answered excitedly. "I've been trying to get that across to other people all day, but you're the first to really understand. Oh Hermione, I love you so much," he finished, dropping his voice to a low seductive whisper that sent chills down her spine, as well as through her unseen nether regions.

"Really?" She asked in a small hopeful voice as she looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Yes silly. Really," he whispered into her ear silkily.

"Will you come up to my room tonight please? I want to prove it to you." He asked her with an imploring look on his face.

Say no, the voice told her earnestly. You're tired and you already hurt far too much for his games tonight.

"Okay," she agreed with a small happy smile that was more from his affirmation of her worth than from the idea of more loving.

You idiot, the voice said disgustedly at her, before she squashed it flash at the back of her mind.

With a flourish, he quickly stood up from the couch before offering her his hand like the gentlemen she had always known he was.

You wish; grumbled the now distant and muffled voice that she was valiantly ignoring.

After they got to his bed and closed the curtains around them, Ron wrapped a silencing charm around the edges of the bed as well—something that did not go unnoticed by her.

At her questioning look, he explained that Neville had complained to him earlier that day about how uncomfortable he was with accidentally invading their privacy merely by overhearing them.

It seemed a likely enough possibility, and really she was surprised that the issue had not come up long before then.

Why should she fear that the silencing charm meant he was going to hurt her of all things? Hadn't he said he wanted to show her his love to her?

More things were different as he put his hand over hers to stop her from flinging off her robes as they usually were wont towards doing.

"Let me do it," was the quietly spoken request.

She was touched by the care in his voice, but she still was nervous as he carefully laid her down on her back before slowly undoing the buttons down her robe.

His fingers were skillful—something she already knew from previous experience—but what he was doing with just these basic motions went beyond just the everyday task of robing and disrobing one's self.

"We don't think about these actions because we do them all of the time," Ron said, picking up directly from where she had left off in her thoughts.

Okay, I'll admit that that was just a bit creepy, she thought in the back of her mind.

Given the slow pace that he was going towards removing her clothing, it was with little surprise that he had just then finally gotten her robe completely open. In turn, he removed his own robe, and folded it into a neat compact square that he set at the edge of his bed.

"I'm trying to become more orderly like you've always been suggesting in regards to my school work, 'Mione," he supplied with a shrug in response to her surprised look.

"Aren't you always saying that if I get one part of my life in order, then the rest will follow? Well, I'm listening this time," he said solemnly, quickly removing his remaining articles of clothing before returning to his delicate task.

His body produces a lot of heat, she thought with a tiny grin inwards. She could feel her skin becoming flushed with it; as well as the inner shivers that worked their way through her flesh every time he touched her directly or not.

"Tell me how beautiful I am," she requested, surprising herself with her own audacity.

A small pleased look overtook Ron's features from hearing her wish.

"Your skin is the most delightful thing that I—," he said with an ornery eyebrow wiggle, "have ever tasted," he said. He proved his point by licking a stripe up her now exposed belly, wrenching a gasp from her in return.

"And you know how much I like to eat," he said with a devilish grin.

Was he talking about—?

That time he didn't stop to respond to her unspoken question, but continued working on her previous request instead.

"And I love your mouth for many reasons as well," he said with a purr into her ear.

He moved down her body and carefully removed her pants from her legs, and then shortly after he did the same with her panties. The only difference there was that he actually stopped to breathe in the smell of them, eliciting another giggle out of her.

"Wouldn't it be exciting if you were to let me hang onto these one day while you went without?" He murmured in what she assumed was a joking tone.

"Only if it was a mutual agreement," she said with a daring look at him, causing a surprised expression to break out over the features of his face.

"Maybe we'll have to try that then sometime," he murmured as he stalked his way back up her body as though he were a long lean panther intent on taking down its prey. Stealthily he unhooked her bra, and then paused to drop kisses on each of her—many—bruises.

He was gentle, but she still hurt a great deal and she was forced to bite down on her lip to keep from crying out as his lips brushed lightly against those exceedingly tender spots.

"If it hurts, you can cry out," he said breathily a few kisses later. "I'm sure I can find a way to distract you."

He didn't say he would stop hurting you, he just said he would distract you.

However, the worrisome thought was pushed forcefully away as he suddenly slipped a finger into her, and began rubbing it maddeningly against her clit. Not only that, but he further complicated the situation by combining the motion of his finger with his hard and probing tongue against one of the spots on her chest that been throbbing the worst.

She pressed her head against the pillow and fought with herself to tell him to stop. It felt good, but Merlin, the pain was bringing tears to her eyes!

As though sensing her silent battle, suddenly the ability to wield control over that decision was taken from her. He had muttered a spell just before, but she hadn't been aware enough to know what it

was at the time; although now that she knew, she wasn't sure if she wanted to keep knowing.

He had tied her wrists and ankles to the bed posts, and now she was spread eagle on her back. Further controlling the situation, he also had stuck something around the edges of her mouth that kept it open in thanks to the straps tied around the back of her head.

She really couldn't move, and now she was beginning to panic just a bit.

"Wha—ooing?" She attempted to ask him through her open mouth.

"What am I doing?" Ron asked her, giving her an unnerving look. "I would assume it would be obvious. I'm allowing you to experience the full height of pleasure without being bound by your modesty or by society's standards."

By making her completely helpless to his every desire? The voice squealed loudly in her head in fear.

"You can't tell me that you aren't enjoying this," he said in a matter of fact and calm voice. "Your pussy is practically dripping with desire," he said, shocking her with his vulgarity. He had never called it her pussy ever before.

Not once! Her mind supplied sounding more than just a little hysterically indignant.

He slid two fingers into her depths hard, and she choked out a cry at the unexpected force he had used.

"I love how your cheeks are so flushed with your want for this," he said, with a sharp twist of his fingers inside her body. He pulled his hand out and she looked at the juices that were slowly dripping down into his palm.

"See?"

He put his fingers back down towards her "pussy," but this time he moved them back a bit further.

"OOO!" She had tried to say "no," but couldn't make her lips say the "n" with them apart like this.

"Hush. Relax. You're my big girl, you can take this," he said, sparing her a look of careful regard before pushing a wet cum covered finger into her asshole slightly. It might have been wet enough, but she was nowhere near relaxed enough to take what felt like a brutal invasion of her rectum.

The pain made her squirm wildly, but his only response was to look back up at her with that cold smile of his, and then push his finger in deeper.

He can't—he wouldn't! Her panicked brain shouted incoherently.

"You know, this'll go a lot easier for you if you just relax," he suggested a bit more pointedly, shoving another finger into her arse that caused a sharp jolt of pain to go through her abdomen.

"Lease don't do dis," she begged forcefully, her fear making her sweat against the chill she felt running up and down her spine.

"Hush," he smiled at her as though it were the easiest thing in the world.

He removed his fingers, causing her to sigh in relief. However, her sigh was soon cut off with a gasp of pain as he began pushing himself into her arse.

It felt as though he were tearing her open. The pain was sharp within her body, turning her stomach almost as much as the sounds of his moans were.

"You feel wonderful," he panted against her belly.

Tears were streaming down her face as he continued to brutally rape her anal cavity. She strained against the ropes, nearly rubbing her wrists raw in the process, but even that wasn't enough to distract her from the pain his cock was causing as it continued its trek farther into her depths.

"Lease," she begged as the pain became nearly unbearable.
"Lease," she said through the gag again. The look on his face was

one of triumphant bliss, and she wondered how he could be having so much pleasure while she was in so much pain.

HSHSHS

Severus didn't have a chance to talk with the boy for the rest of that day, as his time was largely taken up by the rest of his classes that afternoon, and then having to deal with his two youngest snakes that had been involved with the incident itself.

He had tried to imply to them the importance of cunning versus brute strength, but also that being able to bide one's time was likewise an important skill that they needed to learn to exploit if they were to ever truly become part of the Slytherin house.

"After all," he had remarked quietly, "a hot-headed Slytherin without a plan is hardly more than a foolhardy Gryffindor."

That had certainly caused a reaction to fire off in their young brains.

It wasn't until the middle of the next day—a Saturday—that he was finally able to speak with Harry in private. Luckily he found the boy where he was supposed to be, in the dimly lit and putrid hallway that he was quite certain had already found a way into the lad's already overactive dreamland.

And why shouldn't his dreams be over the top? Look at what Blaise and Draco told you; the boy could potentially become the next dark lord with the experiences that he has had with his despicable relatives.

Once again, as he rounded the corner of that disgusting hallway, he saw the edges of Harry's legs—from where they were sticking out of the doorway—give a sudden knowing twitch.

Severus knew of the muggle saying, "eyes in the back of one's head," but it was going a bit far to assume the boy had eyes in the back of—what—his heels?

He silently chided himself for such ridiculous thoughts as he walked the final steps up to where the boy was still steadily working.

"Potter," he said, speaking the name in what he hoped was a level and even tone.

The boy sat up and turned around slowly, and a bit painfully it seemed as well, he thought with rare burst of sympathy.

"Sir," the teen greeted him wearily, before starting to get to his feet.

"No Harry, just lean back against the wall. There is no need to get up."

There, he had said the dreaded "H" word.

For his part, Harry merely sat back down with a sudden ungraceful thump, his eyes wide with clearly viewable shock.

And then the boy blinked, and all was as it had been; his stone mask firmly back in place.

Severus then did the unthinkable and sat down on the floor next to him! One long leg he crossed underneath himself, but he stretched the other out in concession to a knee that had seen better days even before he had been forced to go back into spying.

Moreover, he even opted to lean back against the very wall that Po—Harry himself was leaning on, if only a bit more stiffly now, thanks to his professor's unexpected close proximity.

"This mess that you're cleaning is not the whole of the detention itself," Severus started out easily enough, his hands folded neatly in his lap; while his peripheral vision watched the unsettled form of his student who had continued to watch him carefully.

When Harry didn't respond, he continued; fully aware that in past years the teen would have said something in that moment of empty silence.

"The manual labor part of the detention is thus only stage one. Tonight, we will begin stage two as well."

That time he did turn to look at his student.

The boy blinked slowly before pulling himself out of his funk with a slight shake of his head.

"Yes sir," he answered without a hint of telltale emotion in his voice.

Severus found it a bit unnerving that the lad had not asked any questions in response to his surprise announcement.

"Stage two is the part of the detention that I have previously only put into practice with members of my own house."

That bit of information did cause a reaction in the boy, but it was small enough that he might have missed it had he not been looking very carefully for it.

Harry's breathing had picked up speed ever so slightly when he had mentioned the part about only using the concept with his own, but that was all.

And still the boy said nothing.

It was almost unusual enough to be annoying, but not quite.

"What happens in the second stage is very simple; I help you figure out what's wrong in your life and then we move on."

The boy lifted a wary eyebrow at him—an expression which I have no doubt that he picked up from me in the first place.

"And what is it that you get out of this, sir?"

In other words, the teen was clearly asking him what sadistic pleasure he got out "helping" his students.

"In the long run Harry," there was that "H" word again, "it makes my life significantly easier to bear."

He had told the truth there, but certainly not the entire or in-depth truth, as the teen's eyes seemed to say from their continued narrow eyed look up towards him.

However, perhaps it was the exhaustion in his thin frame that gave him a reason not to argue the point, or perhaps it was merely

because he already knew that his potions' master had told him all he was going to say about his reasons at that time.

Therefore, instead of the expected argument or debate that Severus had half-expected from the younger man, all he got for his troubles was a carefully controlled nod. It told Severus that Harry was allowing him to slide on this point for now, but those words would eventually be forthcoming unless the truth was revealed to him in some other manner, sometime in the near future.

And likely it will be, he thought.

Severus made a show of checking the time with his wand. As he had suspected, it was just after two in the afternoon.

"Your instructions for the rest of the day are these: You will continue here until four o'clock, and then you will meet me at the end of this hallway precisely two hours later at six. In that time off, you are to shower, change clothes and even nap if you desire, but what you are not to do is to eat. We shall be doing that together," he heard a definite gulp that time, "after I have collected you. Are those instructions quite clear to you?"

"Yes sir," the answer was spoken at a significantly softer level that time.

"And should you wonder, yes both Albus and Minerva are equally aware of our changes in plans."

HS HSHSHS

Not his changes in plans, but our changes in plans, Harry caught himself thinking a bit wildly.

"It would be unlikely that anyone will notice my absence anyways, sir," he answered truthfully.

"Hm," was his professor's unreadable response.

"Should I wear anything in particular, sir?" He thought it a prudent question to ask.

"Something comfortable, I should think, that is not your uniform," his professor told him with a strict look.

Great; he was completely and utterly screwed by that final comment. Why couldn't I have just kept my stupid mouth shut? He thought angrily to himself, digging his nails hard into his palm farthest away from where Professor Snape was still sitting.

"Should I still wear robes sir?" He asked, trying not cringe at the nervous sound of his voice.

"At least for the journey, of course," was the mystifying reply.

Journey? What journey? He thought anxiously.

"Yes sir," he murmured, casting his eyes down on the floor away from the still intimidating face of the man he most wanted to impress who was sitting less than an arm's length away from him.

Beside him, his professor made a move to stand up, but halted his progression at the last moment to look directly at his still lowered head.

"Harry."

Hearing his name issued from the man's lips was almost enough to make him cry.

Merlin, he was pathetic!

"Sir?" He asked, looking up to the man who was now crouched on the floor beside him.

"Do you have a problem with any of what I have told you?"

Such a simple question!

He hated himself that much more that he could not give just an equally simple answer, meaning that he could not answer at all—at least not properly, and certainly not here in the open hallway where anyone could potentially stroll by.

He finally responded by opening his mouth, only to close it and shake his head no at the same time; literally cancelling himself out in the process.

I wish; was the morbid thought that followed that failed endeavor.

"Harry?" The question was so softly spoken that he wondered if he hadn't imagined it.

"Perhaps you'll understand when I see you later at six," his voice said finally in what he was sure must have sounded like a very disconnected tone.

His professor looked as though he wanted to say more on the matter, but then like Harry, he changed his mind, and stood up instead.

"I will see you at six o'clock then," the man's deep baritone voice said to him as Snape began walking away.

When Harry finally opened his fist, he was unsurprised to see blood from where his fingernails had sliced through his flesh.

He took a deep steadying breath and then scooted his body back over to the doorway. If he wanted to trust Snape to help him, then he had to tell him the truth.

And that meant wearing the truth, regardless of how unpleasant it made him feel.

Chapter Seven – 'Journey' Pretty Well Describes It All Right

Harry didn't go to his dorm room to clean up at the designated time, but went back to the room of requirement instead. There, he took a quick shower, changed clothes—urgh—and then collapsed into bed to get in as much rest as he could before he needed to go and meet with his professor.

For their journey, he thought, not particularly liking the sound of that idea.

Besides, when had Snape ever called him Harry?

Something was up.

And the sheer number of possible reasons for it frightened him very much.

HS

Harry was waiting at the prearranged hallway precisely at six o'clock when Severus arrived there.

"I'm glad that you decided to be on time. Your previous appearances in past years had led me to wonder if you understood the concept at all."

"It's entirely possible that you were correct, sir," was the young man's cool response.

"No reaction to the implications in my statement?" He couldn't help asking as he began leading the way down the hallway.

"I'm fully aware that I have been—and still am—an idiot."

"Perhaps that statement is less true this year though," Severus amended for him.

Harry briefly turned and quirked an eyebrow at him, but otherwise said nothing.

"What allowed you make that realization?" Severus asked.

"Oh, I've always known it, sir," was the younger man's somewhat disturbing answer.

"I would have thought that your younger years would have been steeped in praise for you," Severus asked, digging deeper.

"They were certainly steeped in something, sir. I'll give you that," the teen said with a slight bow towards him.

They continued on in silence until finally Severus spoke to tell the lad they had arrived at their destination.

The entrance to Severus's rooms was guarded by the Hogwart's Potions Master from two centuries prior; a rather formidable man with even less regard for humans—or children—than Severus himself had. Severus knew that Albus thought it rather amusing that he had chosen Professor Ogsworth as his guardian then, all considering.

Ogsworth's portrait had been painted about ten years into his tenure there; a decision that ultimately had turned out to be a very good thing, since the man completely disappeared during a random potions' explosion during his seventh year advanced potions making class, only a few months afterwards. According to the legend, the man had been gone by the time the smoke cleared, yet no one in any of the surrounding hallways had seen him leave; while all of his belongings had remained as well.

As a testament to the legend, some of the books that now resided in Severus's personal library were signed with the name, "Ardous F. Ogsworth." Furthermore, the books had come with the rooms, leading him to wonder more than once on what exactly had really transpired on that fateful day to that Potions master of the past.

He did not share any of this with the boy, feeling that he could always bring it up later should he need something to change the subject with.

He said his password in a very low voice—False prophets—and the portrait opened up, allowing him to enter his quarters with an underweight, scrawny fifth year Gryffindor following directly behind.

Behind them, the door—for that was how it looked from the inside—shut with a heavily muffled thump. He looked to his side where the younger man was standing and decided that the time was right for unraveling one of the mysteries of the boy's life.

"As you may have already noticed, I keep my rooms at a very comfortable temperature. Thus, there is little reason to wear robes inside these walls." That said; he began undoing the buttons on the front of his own black robes; all the while keeping half an eye focused on the smaller teen beside him.

He watched in interest as Harry gritted his teeth hard, while breathing deeply through his nose for an entire breath in and out. Then the boy's face became bland and seemingly disinterested as he began unbuttoning his robes as well.

It was only as the boy got them off of his thin form did Severus finally began to understand the lad's hesitation regarding the topic.

What on earth was he wearing, and why?

He took the robe from the boy and proceeded to hang it up on one of the many hooks that hung on the wall beside the door. Next to the boy's own smaller robes, he hung his significantly longer ones, and then he turned to Harry and indicated that they should walk into the room itself proper.

His rooms were quite adequate for him; their underground placement merely giving him a further feeling of protection every time he was there. The first room that they walked into was not simply a space designated for only one activity, but rather an area that played host to several purposes at once.

To the left sat a small kitchenette and a small wooden table surrounded by four chairs of similar design. In the middle of the room, sitting at a right angle from one another were two soft black, fabric covered couches; both long enough for him to lie down upon without needing to curl his legs in the process.

On the far right wall sat his fireplace, which was currently crackling brightly with more than warmth to combat the ever present chill of the dungeons. In the back of the room stood a long table with more

than one project sitting atop it. Around it were two stools—and there were more hidden in the corner, shrunk down to save space.

However, perhaps the most overwhelming thing about his main room was the simple abundance of books lining the many shelves that had carefully been carved from the very walls themselves, many centuries prior. It was those walls that he found his student staring wide-eyed at; even as the smells from their dinner sitting atop his dining table began wafting tantalizingly under their noses.

"I see that you're admiring my collection of books," he commented dryly.

"Yes sir," the awe still clearly evident in his voice.

"Let's eat first and then perhaps later you can look at them more in-depth."

HSHS

Hermione blinked her eyes and looked around her surroundings very slowly. It felt as though she was awakening from some kind of strange dream, but without any memory of having fallen asleep in the first place.

Well, she was in the Gryffindor common room; that much she could tell just from the visual clues within her vicinity.

She moved her eyes to the window and saw with a touch of discomfort that the sky was already dark.

How—? Was her disjointed thought. It had been daylight only—only moments before. She frowned and tried to think backwards, but the persistent weight in her limbs and brain continued to distract her.

"Hermione?" A voice murmured from beside her. After what felt like ages, she managed to turn her head and look into the worried eyes of Ginny Weasley.

"Hermione? Are you okay?" Ginny repeated at her from what felt like a long ways away.

"I'm fine," she said, trying to smile but feeling that she was not doing a very convincing job of it.

"Are you sure?" Ginny's eyes clearly indicated what she thought of Hermione's lackluster reply.

"Just—," she fought her brain to find the right word. "Just tired," she said, smiling her lie a touch easier this time.

Ginny looked as though she didn't quite believe her, but wasn't willing to press it quite yet—especially not in front of the rest of the common room.

"You'd best get to bed then, understand?" Ginny told her firmly, the worry not quite gone from her eyes.

"Just heading there, Gin," she smiled quickly, her facial muscles finally coming back under her control.

After the younger girl had left her, Hermione once again tried to understand what had happened to her that evening. Her body had continued to feel uncomfortably heavy; almost as though her limbs had all been shot full of something like Novocain.

HSHSHS

Harry did not know what to make of the man sitting across the table from him. He was being downright civil to him, after years of not.

It had struck him earlier that evening that perhaps Snape was only doing all of this because Blaise had talked to him after all. The more he thought about that possibility, the more he realized the likelihood of it. It had occurred to him that he ought to be mad—or maybe even horrified at what his friend had mentioned about him—but the new Harry chose not to.

If he could trust him enough to tell him the truth, then he could trust him enough to make his own judgments. Not only that, but this gave Harry a chance to find out if the character judgments he had made about certain people were to be trusted or not.

Besides, this sudden change in Snape had helped him further his agenda, and at a much quicker rate as well.

"I must admit that I am surprised that you haven't yet accused me of trying to poison you," Snape said in an even voice to him from across his own plate of chicken, rice and assorted vegetables.

"I'm no longer worried about such inane trivialities," was his dry answer.

"At one point it would have bothered you very much," was the inquisitive reply. Snape's dark eyes were looking at him carefully, nearly without pause.

"I suppose it comes down to a couple of factors then," he answered as he sliced another piece of chicken off for himself.

"And they would be?" Snape prompted.

"First of all, if I get poisoned by you—or anyone else for that matter—then I never have to go back to the Gryffindor dorms," he said.

Let him chew on that one for a bit, he thought with almost a wild sense of glee.

"And second of all," he said, continuing before he got prompted again. "You're a good man. You're good at what you do, and you understand the rules of the game. If you really wanted to get rid of someone, I have little doubt that your patience would be substantial enough to last until they were graduated. After all," Harry looked up at him with a hard look, "if they die after they have left Hogwarts, it is a great deal harder to trace it back to you, as compared with if they had died here under your tutelage. Sir," he finished before reaching for his pumpkin juice as a way to look at the man's reaction to his reasoning.

He watched as his professor blinked his eyes a few times before looking at him in a new and calculating manner.

"What is it about the Gryffindor dorms that you find so distasteful?" Snape's voice was hushed.

"Mostly it's the thought that someone will kill me in my sleep that bothers me the most," he answered with a grimace towards the older man.

"Perhaps you are reading too much into the situation," Snape mildly suggested to him.

Perhaps you are not reading enough into the situation, he thought with sudden abandon.

"Perhaps—however, since you did not personally hear the threat I received from the Weasel, I can hardly fault you for not understanding the severity of the situation at hand," Harry replied calmly.

His professor raised an eyebrow at that statement.

"What kind of threat?"

Odd, the man actually sounds actually concerned.

"A lewd and unpleasant one, sir," he said, taking his last bite of dinner and pushing the plate away in satisfaction.

"It would help if you would explain."

"I don't want help, sir—not with this," he added.

"May I ask why not?" Snape's tone had abruptly gone cold with those words.

Apparently he thinks me a bigger moron that he's been letting on.

"Because I don't want any witnesses, sir," he said with a feral grin.

He was satisfied to see his professor's eyebrows rise in response to the implied threat.

"Has he truly hurt you that badly?"

And abruptly Harry felt that he was done with their particular conversation, and began feeling the itch to move around.

"Is this how stage two always works, sir?" He diverted.

"Not always," the man's dark eyes glittered at him. "Perhaps I should ask the question in another way. Is Weasley's offense against you heinous enough that you are willing to risk Azkaban over getting your vengeance on him?"

Harry found that he had no good answer for the man, so he merely smiled at him in a way that suggested darker things than punishing Weasley were on his mind.

"I see," Snape said, leaning back in his chair and narrowing his eyes at him.

"Let's take this conversation to the sitting area, shall we?" He said to Harry, the command clear in his voice.

HSHSHS

Severus was beginning to see why Blaise had brought the boy's situation to him. There was a cold darkness lurking behind the boy's polite mask that reminded him somewhat of the Dark Lord himself. It was the need to hurt those around him that Snape could see looking back at him when he looked into the teen's face.

Severus looked at the young man sitting to his left.

"How did you get that scar on your face?" He asked.

"How did you break your nose?" the boy responded with an upraised eyebrow.

"Fair enough question; which time are you inquiring about?" Severus asked.

"The first."

"My father hit me," Severus answered none too quickly.

"Why?"

He looked at the boy sitting on the opposite end of the couch from him. The fifth year was sitting with his back against the arm of the

couch with one leg curled underneath him, peering up at him with a rather intense and calculating expression. However, Severus found his eyes most drawn to the boy's hands. They were the only moving part of him; sometimes in his lap, sometimes hidden at his sides, but never still, never calm.

"Because he was drunk," Severus answered matter-of-factly.

"And angry at you?"

"I was simply the most accessible outlet for his rage," Severus answered; his mind thinking back over those horrid days with more of an objective eye than he would have originally thought possible.

When the boy didn't answer immediately, Severus turned the question back around again.

"What about the scar on your face? How did you acquire your newest addition?"

Severus watched the boy chew the inside of his cheek for a moment before responding.

"My uncle used me as an outlet for his rage," the teen said with a smile that did not touch the icy green orbs staring back at him.

"How did the actual injury occur?" He asked interestedly, watching as Harry smiled that worrisome smile back at him.

"It turns out that wizards really do bleed," he answered coolly, skirting around the actual inquiry with ease.

"Your uncle was trying to ascertain that?" Severus asked incredulously.

"I'm—I'm not entirely sure," the boy admitted in a halting voice, narrowing his eyes as he looked away.

"How did you keep yourself from bleeding to death?"

"Ah, that," the grin suddenly returned. "I cauterized it."

"You did what?" Severus exclaimed loudly, completely caught off guard.

"Wild magic set my wound on fire, allowing me to survive," the boy said coolly, as though he were merely commenting on the weather and not the insanity of cauterizing his own flesh.

Severus found himself at a brief loss for words.

"And your aunt?" He asked softly after some silence had passed with the boy adding anything else to his account.

"Yelled."

"At your uncle?"

The boy choked out a bitter laugh that could have rivaled one of the dark lord's frightful own.

"What could she have possibly yelled at you for?"

"For bleeding on her nice clean floor," the lad said with a dark smile.

"Surely you are joking," Snape answered with a look of disbelief.

The boy smiled bitterly back at him, and Severus knew in that instant that he had spoken the truth.

"What happened to make your uncle act in such a way towards you in the first place?" Severus asked, watching the boy closely.

He certainly wasn't expecting the reaction he got.

HS HSHSHSHS

Harry couldn't help but laugh at Snape's ridiculous question. When he finally gained control over himself, he looked up to find the other man in the same position he had been in before Harry's miserable bout of mirth had taken over; only now, the concern in his eyes was almost palpable.

"I was born," he finally managed to say, his face still twisting from some kind of unidentifiable emotion.

"And why does your uncle find that so distasteful?" The man asked him, raising an eyebrow coolly.

"You really don't know?" Harry asked, looking critically at his professor.

"Enlighten me," Snape's face was hard, almost angry looking, but Harry no longer gave a damn.

"I'm a freak," he said, repeating the word that he had heard thrown at him from so many people throughout his life.

He watched Snape's eyes narrow at his description, but decided not to wait for the man's response.

"You know, a freak? A weirdo? A bloody waste of space? All those things you and everyone else has been calling me my entire life?" He asked, getting to his feet and beginning to pace.

"And how does your aunt feel?" If anything, Snape's voice had gotten only colder.

"She hates me; they both do," he ground out bitterly, his green eyes flashing with long buried emotions.

"They wish I had never been born, and they hate that they had to get stuck with me; a worthless, little nobody freak. To them, I have about as much charm as a bloody skunk," he spat, leaning against the far wall and crossing his arms. He could feel himself smiling, and he imagined that it was a frightening sort of smile.

HSHSHSHSHSHS

Severus looked worriedly at the boy-who-lived as he paced before him. The teenager's face was tinged with pink, and his normally bright green eyes were dark with barely controlled rage. As Harry had hoped, Severus was finding his smile to be very discomfiting indeed. It reminded him greatly of Lucius Malfoy, directly before the man began torturing someone. It was also similar to the type of smile that he had seen on the faces of serial killers and psychotics.

"Have you spoken to the headmaster about any of this?" He asked in a calm voice; loathe to set off the lad off any farther.

"Tried."

"And?" Severus probed.

"Old man didn't want to hear about it. Said that all families," the boy spit the word out like a curse, "have their problems, and my ability to withstand these stresses will merely build my character," Harry sneered distastefully at him.

"And has no one ever checked up on you?" Severus was having trouble believing that no one had ever noticed any of the things the boy was talking about.

Harry smiled down at him with that dreadful smile again and Severus instinctively moved his hand closer to his wand.

"Dumbledore insists that the blood wards at my aunt's house are there for my protection. Sometimes I see mysterious people around the neighborhood, but I don't think the old man really has any concept of what my life is really like," the boy said, turning away and adding in a very quiet voice, "No one does."

"And why should they bother with me? I'm Gryffindor's fucking little golden boy. I must be getting treated like a bloody prince!" Harry said, pointing a finger angrily at him.

Severus stood up then, feeling the need to try and regain control over the situation before it got any more explosive.

"You know what I am though?" Harry bit out in a very low voice—perhaps a man's voice, even.

Severus shook his head wordlessly, curious despite the rising danger.

"A pariah—a scapegoat for every single person around me," the teenager said in an almost dead voice.

"Harry—," he tried, but a sharp look back at him warned him off from interrupting.

"Vernon gets yelled at while at work? Blame Harry," the boy was whispering hoarsely now, his eyes unfocused as he watched some kind of horror folding out before him in his mind. "Gryffindor loses popularity? Blame that fucking Potter boy. Someone's potion gets botched?" Harry looked at him briefly, a small lost smile on his face. "Blame that dunderheaded Potter boy who looks so much like his fucking, worthless, wretched excuse for a sperm donor father."

Severus swallowed, abruptly ashamed of himself.

But the young man's tirade wasn't over yet.

"Some people believe that the worst man in our world is ol' Voldy himself," the teen said, his eyes still unfocused. "But they're wrong," Harry laughed bitterly, hugging his arms around himself tightly in a moment of self-comfort.

"Who is it then, Harry?" He asked, feeling fairly positive of what the boy would say.

HS HSHSHSHSHSHS

"Me," Harry finally looked up at him again, his eyes finally focused for the first time in several minutes.

"And what horrible things have you done?" The other man inquired; disbelief evident in his face.

"I figure that I must have done something awful in a previous life—maybe I was Hitler or that Italian dude, Mussolini or whatever his name was, and this is my payback. Why else has my life been filled with such utter shit?" Harry took a step towards the other man.

He could feel his fear coming on strong as he prepared for the misery of explaining his life to the only person who had ever bothered to ask.

"After killing off old Voldy the first time, I then spent the next ten years as a worthless house elf for my only remaining relatives. When they weren't beating me or breaking my bones, then they were starving me and working me to death," he stated, seeing the other man's eyes widen slightly.

"They lied to me about my heritage, about where I was from. And then, when I finally made it back to the wizarding world, I found out that everyone knows more about my story than even me. Dumbledore can pretend all he likes that he's looking out for what's best for me, but if that's true, then why the HELL did he LEAVE ME with the DURSLEYS TO BEGIN WITH?" He shouted, and looking down, he realized with some surprise that he had the front of Snape's robes in his fists.

"Everything he does to me is supposedly for the 'Greater Good,' but that's a crock. It's all a crock. He's out to hurt me, to make me suffer. He lies to me, and then lies more when I ask him about it. He doesn't talk to me before making decisions about my life for me. It's his fault that I had to grow up in that hellhole. It's his fault that I don't know anything about myself or about my family. It's his fault that I spend the summers wishing for death, wanting to murder that fucking bastard who tries to break whatever is left of me after Voldy gets done exacting his revenge on me at the end of the school term!"

Nearly blind with rage, he threw himself at Snape and up against the wall, probably with enough force to cause the other man to bruise. His professor wasn't reacting though, and for some reason, that infuriated him even more.

"Are you listening to me? Can you hear what I'm saying? The bastard broke me, left me to die, doesn't give a shit about me or my life! Thanks to him, I'll never know what it is to be safe, or to have a home. He's a fucking worthless old demented bastard!" Harry's eyes were streaming tears, but he couldn't be bothered with them. He needed to get this out before he exploded, before he cut his own damn throat because he simply couldn't stand it anymore.

"I don't give a fuck that everyone thinks he's so wise! I hate him! I hate them all! I hate my uncle! I hate my father! He didn't even love my mother! He was fucking Sirius on the side!" He gasped for air, letting his head drop for a moment and therefore missing the brief flash of rage that passed through Snape's eyes at the mention of what his father had done.

"And Sirius," he gasped again, letting go of Snape's robes and falling to the floor at his feet. "S-S-Sirius thinks I'm him. Sirius

thought I was him, and I couldn't get—couldn't get away," he sobbed, cradling his head in his hands.

He didn't notice the wide eyed look of horror that had affixed itself to Snape's face; nor did he notice when the other man crouched down beside him.

"My uncle tried," Harry sobbed as he tried to make his words keep coming. "My uncle tried to make me see—make me understand what it was I was g-good for, but I wouldn't believe him. I c-couldn't. But my uncle, please, my uncle," he completely lost it, and allowed himself to be pulled into the arms that had suddenly appeared around his thin body.

"It hurt so bad, please sir, I'm sorry. I'm sorry," he begged, not knowing why anymore; just more than aware that he must have done something horrible to be treated so badly by all of those around him. He didn't want to make the same mistake with the man who was still holding him as he cried out his sorrows for the first time in years.

"I've got you Harry, I've got you now," the man's voice was whispering softly in his ear; his anguish only increasing with the kindness that his professor was treating him with.

"You're supposed to be angry. You're supposed to hurt me," he whispered brokenly through his sobs. "Why aren't you?"

"Because I give a damn, because this isn't right. No one should have to live like that; no one," his professor said, pulling Harry's face to look up at him.

"Not even me?" Harry asked weakly.

"Not even you," Snape said with a stern look as he continued to hold him tightly.

"Not even you," he repeated when Harry didn't respond.

Harry finally nodded and then closed his eyes against the tears still spilling out over his cheeks. He even allowed himself to lean more fully against the shoulder that had continued to support him.

He knew he couldn't trust the other man, but he desperately wanted to. He was just so very tired of trying to survive on his own.

Chapter Eight – A New Awareness

It hadn't been much of a chore to lift the underweight boy and put him to bed in his guest bedroom. The lad was exhausted and had barely made a face with Severus had made him drink a vial of Dreamless sleep. Merlin only knew what sorts of horrible things would be floating around the teen's subconscious that night after the kind of evening that had just occurred.

On the other hand, Severus knew that it was pointless for himself to even attempt sleeping before having a chance to think through the many things the child had informed him of—deliberately and not.

And if calling him "Harry" hadn't been bad enough, he had also started thinking of him as "the child," as well. He couldn't even be bothered to roll his eyes at himself, for there were far more serious things to focus on now.

Severus swore under his breath and paced the room as he sought to regain control of his anger. He couldn't help the boy if he were locked away in Azkaban for killing his wretched excuse for a family—let alone the damned creation of a man called Sirius Black.

He had never liked the other man, but he would not have thought him possible of such a thing as rape, and never in a million years would he have thought he would purposely harm his own beloved godson.

Of course, as Harry was quickly teaching him, Severus's beliefs were in serious need of a complete and total overhaul. As of late, it was quite believable that the impossible could in fact be true; even if it was a miserable and shameful truth that made his gut boil with anger.

And James, he brooded darkly to himself, could it have been true that James had been involved in an illicit affair with the mutt on the side? Could he really bring himself to believe that the bastard had been cheating on his sweet Lily?

He flopped on his couch and put his head in his hands dejectedly. He couldn't help but believe the boy; the truth was far too evident in the lad's desperate eyes. He knew that Lily had believed in James's change in character, chalking it up to his increased age and

subsequent maturity, but Severus hadn't been as convinced. He knew that Lupin had felt similarly, for they each had separately watched James and Black quietly for some time. The wolf had even attempted to speak with him once on it, but their—surprisingly civil—conversation had been interrupted by that damned mutt.

And then it was too late, he thought somberly to himself, as the flood of memories washed back over him from that awful Halloween night where Voldemort had attempted to extract his revenge on the Potter family.

Because of me was his additional thought as his eyes began to burn with the shame of that night—that entire wasted segment of his life.

It was his fault that the boy had been forced to grow up alone and at the mercy of his contemptible uncle. It only seemed fitting that he be the one to help put the child back together.

Softly, he crept back into the boy's room and sank down into the chair next to the bed. Even asleep, and with a sleeping potion in his system, the lad still looked troubled. Severus noted with displeasure that Harry was sleeping with his back against the wall, his body curled into a tiny defensive ball.

It was the observation of this position that broke any remaining doubts lingering in Severus's mind. Harry's sleeping form was reminiscent of a certain dark haired youngster in his own past, and after that evening's revelations, the similarities were quite striking.

And damning, was the morose thought that passed through his mind as he watched the boy sleep.

How could I have been so blind—so stupid as to put my damned prejudices above the suffering of Lily's only child? He railed internally against himself.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes wearily. There were a great many things weighing on his conscious now, but none of those could easily be dealt with until morning.

Except killing Black, he thought, but that was something that would have to be dealt with very carefully and from a distance to boot. It was quite evident that he was the only adult left in Harry's life who

could be trusted to do right by the boy, and so it was necessary that he keep himself largely out of trouble, if only for the sake of the child.

. . .

Dumbledore was not sleeping well that night either. Three am found him pacing his office in only his nightclothes and slippers, his mind awl with many problems and concerns surrounding young Harry Potter.

He had been serious when he had told Severus that he feared they might be losing the young man. Try as he might, he could not get the Gryffindor's angry and bitter eyes to stop staring at him from within his own mind.

After all the time I have spent with the Dursleys, I can certainly understand how the Dark Lord feels in regards to Muggles.

Harry's words played back repeatedly through his mind, and he sought to get past the pain in his heart that they caused him.

When I reach my majority, you can bet that I'm going to pay them a visit.

Well, the boy had left very little to the imagination about what he meant by that.

"And are you willing to become a murderer in order to attain your vengeance?" He muttered to himself, stroking Fawkes as he did. The bird looked at him with sorrowful eyes. Fawkes had likely seen the pain surrounding the young man better than he had.

Perhaps he should have another chat with Severus in order to see how the lad was doing with the man's detention. After all, he had told him to keep an eye on the boy, and he knew that despite the enmity that existed between the two, Severus would obey his request to the letter.

After all, Albus was not the only one with guilt over the actions of his past.

. . .

Unlike his brothers and sister, Ron actively enjoyed the "chore" of removing the gnomes from their yard. However, it had not always been so. When he had been younger and smaller, they had scared him dreadfully with their leering ugly faces and fearful teeth. His nearly paralyzing fear had lasted until he discovered a way to scare them back just as much—if not more.

In the wizarding world, much like the muggle world, the concept of an "eye for an eye" was not unknown. Although wizarding beings often chose to retaliate with magical means instead of physical, the idea was still very similar.

On the other hand, what Ron did to get back at the gnomes was very muggle—rather plebian, as Draco Malfoy would undoubtedly say if he were asked for his opinion on the matter.

He remembered that day quite well. It had been blazing hot, and the gnomes had been more daring in their pursuits after him all that entire afternoon. Finally though, one had gotten a little too close to his hand and he had grabbed it up. But instead of throwing it up and around—as his brothers had undoubtedly taught him to do by that point—he had held onto it.

Oh, it had tried to get away; shooting him nasty looks and screeching mean things to him, but he had chosen not to be cowed by its frightful nature anymore. And in order to prove that, he had set up a bit of a demonstration to its fellow gnomes.

"See this?" He had bellowed out quite loudly a good bit away from the house. He had shown the crowd of angry muttering gnomes their fellow compatriot that was locked tight in his hot and sweaty little boy grip.

They had cursed at him as he had known they would. They had raised up their little fists to him and had snarled and bared their teeth at him. And he had ignored them and gone ahead with his plan; calmly ripping the little gnome's arm off right in front of them. He had thrown it at them, and they had scattered before it, as though it were some kind of accursed thing.

He had won against them, and it had been a heady feeling.

Ron had spent most of his life knowing what exactly he wasn't. He wasn't extremely talented at Quidditch; he wasn't particularly popular amongst his brothers or family, especially since being one of the youngest in a family of stars had a tendency to wash out any of his own rather meager accomplishments; he wasn't particularly funny; he wasn't a jokester, or even particularly book smart. He couldn't even be the bloody youngest; no that spot was taken up by Ginny, the only girl out of the lot of them.

But being known among the gnomes as the redheaded child to watch out for, well that counted for something in his book. His own peers—such as they were—might not care for him beyond using him as a guinea pig in their experiments, but he was the boy who had frightened those fearsome creatures that stalked their garden and their yard.

Him.

. . .

"Colin," Ron said, coming right up behind the small, mousey haired boy, causing him to jump in surprise. Luckily they were in the far back corner of the library, and there was no one else around them.

Still though, Ron thought ruefully. I'll have to punish him for that later.

"What happened to having 'eyes in the back of your head,' there Col'?" He teased the younger boy a bit more grumpily than he normally did, before sitting down in the chair directly beside him.

Colin looked at him warily, already aware of the change in Ron's typical demeanor.

"Sorry Ron. I was studying for my Potions quiz," the younger boy said in an apologetic tone.

"The slimy git," Ron grouched darkly.

"Yeah," Colin said in a quiet voice.

"Have you seen Potter?"

"Not since breakfast." He answered quickly as Ron's frown turned into a full glower.

"Bloody hell. Where the fuck is that bastard hiding?" He bitched in a soft voice.

Colin didn't answer. There didn't seem to be any kind of answer that would satisfy the much larger boy beside him.

"You haven't heard anything about Hermione, have you?" Ron said abruptly, peering a bit more closely than Colin would have liked.

"Why? Has something happened to her?" He asked in a neutral voice, trying to make his normally quavering tones into something a regular fourteen year old would produce.

Ron looked at him for a full minute before jerking the smaller boy closer to him. Colin was on the edge of his seat, practically in the fifth year's lap. Ron released the front of his robes with one hand and trailed it down to the front of Colin's trousers.

Colin felt his breath catching in his throat as he tried not to jerk away from those invasive probing fingers.

"What have you heard?" Ron growled at him, ignoring the squeak Colin made as his nuts were grabbed in a brutal hold.

"J-Just that she's n-n-not been much l-like she usually is, I swear! Please Ron," he begged softly, not giving voice to the pain that begun clogging his throat with tears.

"My room, tonight," were Ron's tersely given orders, before he released the smaller boy, dropping him to the floor in an undignified heap.

He stood up and walked away without even looking to see if the other boy had gotten back up.

HSHSHS

Harry awoke the next morning in an unfamiliar, but comfortable bed. It took him a moment to remember why he was there, and then a moment more to recall why it was that he felt so very at ease.

He glanced over to the side of the bed and wasn't entirely surprised to see his potion's professor propped there in a chair with a potion's journal balanced on his knee. The man's eyes were closed though, and he wondered if that meant the man was actually asleep or just waiting to scare the hell out of him.

Probably the latter, he thought with rare amusement as he gently stretched out his body.

The previous night's memories chose that instance to flood his mind, and he closed his eyes tightly against the shame of everything he had admitted aloud.

"Awake then are you?" A voice broke into his memories.

"Yes, sir," he said quickly, turning his head to peer carefully at the man at his bedside.

His professor stared back at him, an equally careful expression on his face.

"How do you feel?"

How did he feel? No nightmares had plagued him that night because of the dreamless sleep he barely remembered Snape giving him, and to top it all off, he had slept in a bed without fear from being attacked!

"I feel remarkably good, sir," he said in a slow voice, carefully glancing around the bedroom they were in.

There were no knickknacks on the walls or on the table next to the bed, but he hadn't really expected a man like his professor to bother with such trivialities. Surprisingly, the bed's décor was not all black, and instead, he was interested to note that it was a mix of dark shades of green and blue.

Abruptly, he wondered whose bed he was lying in.

Snape must have caught his wandering look around him.

"No, Mr. Potter," he smirked before continuing. "This is merely a spare bedroom that I keep in my quarters for times of need."

"It's really nice," Harry whispered, suddenly overwhelmingly shy. He felt tears fogging his eyes, but for the life of him couldn't figure out why now of all times he should feel such an emotional pull at his heart.

Merely a spare bedroom for times of need, he thought back over his professor's words. Was that all there was to it?

Spare bedroom, he thought again, only to be roused from his steadily darkening thoughts by the sudden appearance of a handkerchief in front of his face. Once more he was glad that Blaise had brewed that Eyesight corrective potion for him. Otherwise his reception of the handkerchief might have been less than positive.

He took the cloth and hastily wiped his eyes with it before looking back at his professor.

The man was still seated in the same place, and his expression was still unfathomable, but as Harry looked into his eyes, he felt that there was a certain amount of—what?—commiseration, or possibly even understanding?

"Thanks for all of this," he said quickly, waving his hand around vaguely. "And I appreciate your allowing me to stay here last night." He ducked his head again and stared intensely at his fingers and the handkerchief that surrounded them.

"I hardly would have cast you out into the hallways, Harry," the man said in a deep voice.

He couldn't make himself look up. Why couldn't he just look up?

"Well, thanks anyway, for not, you know, um," he said, before realizing that he was rambling.

The mattress beside him dipped and he had to fight against his urge to flinch as his professor sat down on the bed next to him.

"Where will you go after today? Back to your dorm? Back to the hallways?"

"Hallways are safer than my dorm, sir," he answered quietly, still not daring to look up.

"And McGonagall cannot help?" Snape's voice was soft, breaking easily through his hard defenses.

"No sir," he answered, not bothering to explain how little his head of house understood regarding his treatment within the dorm.

A slightly uncomfortable silence followed with a surprising question, "Have you been seen by Madam Pomfrey?"

"Sir?" He asked in an uncertain voice, peering up finally.

"I cannot, in good conscience, release you back into Minerva's care," here he noticed a brief twist of the potions master's lips, "If you are still suffering from injuries; especially if they are leftover from this past summer."

Did the man actually know? Or was this just a bizarre scheme of his to purposely keep Harry around longer?

Given his options, there really wasn't much of a choice beyond telling the truth. And why not? He had already given up his most embarrassing secrets, and he hadn't been turned away yet.

"Well?" Snape asked with a look that could have been much sharper, considering the circumstances.

"I—," he began, and taking a breath, he pushed on through his fear quickly. "I have not been seen by her, no."

Snape seemed almost pleased, but Harry understood that it had more to do with his trusting the truth with him, not because the other man had been right.

"It seems that you may have just earned yourself a longer stay here. Do try and not misbehave," the man warned. Although his tone was stern, the look on his face was somehow softer and Harry let out a shaky breath at seeing it.

Whatever happened was going to happen, but this time, he wasn't going to be alone.

It was a nice thought.

HSHSHS

Dub con/non con warning

Ron was already lying on his bed with the bed curtains drawn when Colin made it there that night. After battling with the unfamiliar heavy curtains, Colin was now perched on his knees in front of him; a terrified look on his white face making him look even younger than he was.

"Undress me." Ron barked after casting a silencing spell.

"Ron, please!" The other boy begged piteously, wringing his hands together.

"Undress me," Ron said in a much lower voice, his eyes glinting malevolently in the dim light.

"I already apologized, Ron, a couple of dozen times over," the boy protested, even though his small nimble fingers had already started undoing the buttons on the front of the red haired teen's robes.

"Yes, but you don't really mean it, do you? You still think the great fucking Harry Potter is going to notice you and become someone who you can be 'best of chums with,'" Ron mimicked in a high falsetto while fluttering his eyelashes ridiculously.

Colin wouldn't meet his eyes anymore, although his cheeks were flaming bright red in response from Ron's words.

"Well he's not, so it's time to get used to how life really is!" He yelled, mostly just to see the other boy's responding flinch.

Ron's little speech had given the fourteen year old time to undo all of the fastenings on Ron's clothes. In turn, Ron made quick work of pulling off the offending fabrics and allowing the other boy to feast fully on the image of his naked body.

Colin was in for a treat that night. Before, Ron had only required blow jobs out of the other boy, but tonight he was planning to pop his cherry.

Ron thought that Colin was a smart boy who understood what it meant to try and pick the winning team whenever possible. It was a smart choice, since if Ron was going to break into a spotlight of his own that year, it would require kicking Harry fucking Potter down a few dozen notches.

The first thing to do was to get rid of the Harry Potter fans, and one of the worst resided right there in the Gryffindor tower. Turn everyone against Potter and no one gets hurt—much. However, Colin was a special case, because Ron had discovered quite by accident how the smaller boy had been spending his evenings.

Although it hadn't been Ron's intention to round the corner and find the other boy on his knees before Lee Jordan, it had still happened, and Ron was nothing if not thrifty.

Besides, Colin really did annoy the utter piss out of Ron, and he would be glad if he could shut the other boy up once in a while by teaching him how to better use that mouth of his.

Ron didn't take the time to undress the other boy himself, but stripped him with a spell instead, much to the sudden mortification of the older Creevey boy. He grinned openly as Colin tried to hide his groin with his hands.

"Ron!" Colin's eyes were nearly as wide open as butterbeer caps.

"Shh," he said calmly, sitting up and pushing Colin underneath him with a firm but gentle thrust of his hand.

Mmm, thrust, his mind tried to jump off the tracks at that one.

"You never said anything about taking it any further!" The boy under him accused in a frightened voice as Ron straddled his hips; tightening his legs around the smaller body in such a way that Colin would be hard pressed to get free.

His dick was responding just the way he wanted it to. The tip was already oozing with pre-cum, and he was increasing the sensations

by dragging it up and down the length of Colin's torso—marking him with his scent.

As he leaned down to kiss the boy on his pale soft neck, Colin suddenly surged up with a fury, physically trying to throw him off.

"I don't want to do this! No! Let me go!"

Ron didn't respond, but quickly caught the boy's thrashing arms with a hand and then magically tied them to his bed posts.

"NO! Help!" The other boy cried out in vain, forgetting about the silencing spell that was firmly in place around him.

Ron ignored him and began suckling the sweet skin just below the boy's ear, all the while running his hands up and down the boy's thin chest.

"You're very pretty when you're flushed like this," he whispered seductively in the other teen's ear. He had chosen his words purposely, knowing that they would incite the younger Gryffindor even farther.

"Please Ron!" Colin begged in his ear, even as he began dragging light kisses over the other boy's soft face.

"Should I invite Dennis?" Ron said with a hard look at the other boy's terrified expression.

"No," was Colin's harsh and strangled whisper.

"Does that mean you'll be good for me?" He asked, moving his hand down between them to fondle the other Gryffindor's soft penis into a semi-alert state.

Colin only moaned in response, but it was good enough for Ron.

The only time he spoke after that was right after Ron had finished stretching him, as he had the tip of his cock pressed against his arse hole, ready to fuck him.

"Will it hurt?" The boy's voice trembled in fear.

"Not if you make me happy," Ron grunted, before sliding his slicked penis into the other boy's virgin hole with a slow motion that made them both feel like screaming—although for very different reasons.

He had released the other teen's hands and turned him over on his stomach. He even had had enough pity to put a pillow beneath his thin hips, but he was feeling his patience wane now in the tight heat that now surrounded his most sensitive organ. He moaned at the feeling—it was even more exquisite than fucking Hermione had been.

Colin was a skinny whelp of a boy and Hermione was a fully—or nearly—formed girl. She simply had more space within her than Colin did, and Ron could feel it as the tightness fully enveloped him, further disconnecting him from his rational mind.

"Stay as relaxed as you can," he ordered in a hoarse voice. "It helps if you remember to push out," he added as his eyes fought to roll back in his head.

And then the fucking began in earnest as he began to pull and push his dick back and forth in the silky encompassing wetness that was the smaller boy's beautiful, succulent arse hole. He ignored the high pitched shrieks that Colin was now making as he increased the speed of his thrusts.

"You feel fucking fantastic Col'," he said in a distant voice. He put his hands under the other boy's shoulders, using the extra leverage to fuck deeper, causing a sheen of sweat to break out over both of their pale bodies.

Ron didn't care about Potter at this point. He didn't care that if news of this ever got out, he'd be expelled and probably sent to Azkaban—not to mention dishonoring his family in the process. All he knew was that he needed Colin now, and he needed to cum before his body exploded with the sensations pouring up and out from his dick.

The feeling had begun building as while he had been fingering the boy, but now as the friction built up around him, and the heat only increased, the sound of the their bodies thrusting together was only somewhat muffled by the harsh sounds of their gasping breaths. And then Ron was holding his breath as he urged his body to reach

the climax inside Colin's still tight, ever spasming arse hole. He pulled the other boy's body securely up against his in nearly an upright position; feeling more than hearing the scream that the new position caused Colin to let out; and then he joined the boy in his shaking as he felt his orgasm rip itself from his body as his cock shot cum into his heated depths.

And then he was easing himself from the now damp hole of Colin's no longer virgin arse, turning them both on their sides on the sullied bedspread. His fingers blindly grabbed his wand and he whispered a cleaning spell, feeling the relief of the mess around them disappear into nothingness. He pulled the covers down with one hand, but kept his other firmly around the stomach and chest of the still weeping Colin.

His mind reflected on the memory that the boy has been weeping for some time, but it did not bother him that he had only just noticed. Colin was just a pawn—albeit a fuckable pawn—but still not much more than that.

"Now are you sorry?" He whispers when he had them firmly ensconced in the nest of the many blankets covering his soft bed.

The boy in his arms nodded his head with a ferociousness that he thought more likely due to the shame he felt for himself than anything about his further awe of Harry Potter.

It was of no matter to Ron.

Colin's lesson will be learned soon enough, he thought placidly to himself as he put his arms more firmly around the living, breathing doll lying here next to him in his bed.

He would fuck him again in the morning, and then again that next evening.

And then he would do the same to his brother; promises be damned. Perhaps he should invite Seamus for that event as well.

These were the thoughts that lulled him to sleep that night; providing him with a small smile permanently fixed on his face even in the midst of his dreams.

For his part, Colin lay there quietly, not moving, but not sleeping either. He was making his own plans, but he was going to need help, and he didn't yet know who he could trust enough to turn to.

Chapter 9 – Doing Something

Ron was annoyed.

That little twerp, Dennis Creevey, was nowhere to be found. He had planned on shagging him that afternoon, but now he would have to make other arrangements.

HP

As soon as Ron had finished with him that morning, Colin had grabbed Dennis and made a run for it. Well, run might have been too strong a word, given that he could barely walk. Luckily for him, Dennis—despite his diminutive size—was remarkably strong, and with his brother's help, they had managed to get away fairly quickly.

Unfortunately, he now had no idea what to do next.

"Col, are you okay?" Dennis asked him worriedly, the second year looking up at him with a touch of fear in his eyes.

They were taking a breather in one of the many hidden passageways that existed throughout the castle. Colin had his eyes closed and was resting his head backwards against the cool stone wall behind them, trying to get his heart rate back under control before they got moving again. It didn't help that his rectum felt as though it were on fire from where Ron had buggered him the night before and then again that morning.

"I'll be okay," he said with only a slight grimace; he opened his eyes and smiled reassuringly at his younger brother.

. . .

After a substantial breakfast with his professor, the man asked had him to move to the couch and remove his shirt. Harry was a bit impressed that Snape had been serious about healing him that morning, but he managed to keep his surprise from showing in his face. Instead, he simply took off his shirt and then stared off into space as the man took in the sight of the many wounds and scars that littered his back and chest.

As a result, he missed the look of pained shock that briefly appeared in the other man's eyes as he took in Harry's injured body. Snape quickly gained control of his emotions and set to business, but he couldn't help but wonder how the child before him had slipped through their awareness for so many years.

Harry was roused from his stupor as Snape handed him a vial of potion, which he looked at and sniffed carefully in return. Snape, for his part, did well not to say anything about his mistrust for him, and instead chose to take comfort from the boy's wariness.

Harry flinched a bit as Snape's fingers touched his bruised ribs, and although his professor shot a mildly apologetic glance at him, the man did not remove his hand. He watched as Snape crouched down before him, and valiantly tried to push the anxious feeling that arose in his chest from having the man so close to him.

"Two cracked ribs," the man said in a quiet voice. "Harry, do you know how this happened?"

"My uncle," Harry said quietly, turning his head away in shame.

His professor's hand moved to lightly touch his own hands, which were balled together in his lap.

"Tell me," Snape's voice was smooth—intense—as he looked steadily at him. "Why are you still hiding your injuries from me?"

Harry half-heartedly tried to pull his hands out of the man's surprisingly steady grip, but gave up after only a moment. He had wanted Snape to find out about his injuries, all of his injuries—if he were being honest with himself—but he had not truly prepared himself for what would happen if the man actually did.

"I—," he tried to say, already knowing that any excuse he came up with would ultimately be futile and a waste of energy. "I—," he started again, only to angrily roll his eyes at himself. "Finite incantatem," he very nearly growled.

It was a bit interesting to watch Snape's eyes widen in surprise as the burns on his hands became visible.

"Who?" The man's question was sharp.

"My aunt," he answered angrily.

"Petunia did this to you?" His professor sounded shocked, but it was hardly noticeable against his own feeling of surprise.

"You know my aunt?"

He felt oddly betrayed by the knowledge.

"Your mother and I," Snape's voice was strained. "Your mother and I went to school together."

"You knew my mum?" Harry whispered; ignoring his professor's discomfort as he figuratively leapt upon this new information.

"A long time ago," Snape admitted quietly, his dark eyes looking pained at the recollection.

Harry broke eye contact with his professor and looked down at his hands once more. He didn't want to piss the man off anymore; his being present in the man's quarters was probably already doing enough of that.

He closed his eyes against the sting of bitterness in his eyes and took a deep breath to calm himself.

"She held my hands down on the stove after I accidentally burnt some toast—."

"Toast?" Snape growled in disgust, standing up swiftly and summoning some burn cream. The ointment in hand, he sat down directly next to Harry, causing another flinch to go through his body.

"She did this to you over toast?" The man's voice was incredulous as he began to gently rub the cream into his hands.

. . .

Bloody muggles, Severus thought angrily as he continued to heal the wreckage of the boy before him.

Looking at the child before him, his thoughts drifted over to Blaise Zabini. His snake had looked somewhat like this a few times before, but even that experience had paled in comparison with what he had seen thus far with Harry.

Lily's child, was his mind's painful reminder.

The teenager's face was hard and nearly emotionless as he continued to rub the healing salve into the burns on his hands.

And these are only his physical wounds. Who knows what will come out of this thanks to the mental scars he is left with?

Having finished with Harry's hands for the time being, Severus picked up another vial of healing potion and asked, "Do you recognize this?"

He watched as the teenager carefully sniffed the open vial.

"Skele-gro?"

"A very mild version to help your broken bones knit back together. The rest of your physical wounds can be healed with the healing salve."

He watched as Harry shrugged and then tossed the vile tasting concoction back without even grimacing. Severus raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything as he summoned a glass of water for the teen to drink afterwards.

"Thank you, sir," the boy in front of him said softly.

"I suggest that you lay down while those work," Severus said, standing up and scourging his hands wandlessly. "I will finish the rest of your back after your bones and the other internal injuries have healed. For now though, I must inform your head of house as to your whereabouts, as well as a few other pertinent details regarding your situation."

He watched as Harry closed his eyes without any hesitation and stretched himself out on the couch, still unclothed from the waist up. Severus looked at the young man's body with a critical eye, and

then with a small frown, he reached for the afghan adorning the back of the couch, and pulled it down over the Gryffindor's thin form.

"Don't leave my quarters. Do not try to open anything that is locked, understand?"

"Yes sir," the boy murmured, curling up tighter under the blanket.

Severus stood and looked at the boy for a few moments more and then added another comment.

"Harry," he said hesitantly, causing the child to look up at him curiously. "I will not betray your trust to her, do you understand me?"

"Yes sir," he was awarded by a slightly more positive look on the lad's face. Feeling better, he turned around and went back to his quarters to finish getting ready for the day. He had a meeting to go to.

. . .

His situation, Harry thought to himself sourly. He wondered exactly what his professor would say to the woman. He knew—well, he believed—that the man understood how dense McGonagall could be at times, especially regarding things that she didn't want to know about.

He was rather glad that Snape had added something about not betraying his trust. He hadn't really thought that he would cross that line with McGonagall, but he had known better than to believe in it.

Of course, the man could still turn against him, but Harry doubted it—especially now.

Especially after last night, he thought to himself. He knew he hadn't imagined it when Snape had held him at the end of his tirade.

I've got you, Harry, he heard in his mind.

The proof was in Harry's tingling hands, in the warm feeling in his belly as his stomach began settling down after ingesting the various healing potions. Hell, he was laid out on the man's own couch! In his quarters, no less.

He wondered what Snape would say, but now he also wondered what his head of house would say.

Oh, to be a fly on that wall.

A wave of sleepiness came over him and he yawned against it. He heard the soft footsteps of his professor move through the room, and he heard the accompanying swish of his robes.

The sounds moved closer and he tried to open his eyes to see, but they wouldn't respond to him.

"Sleep, Harry. You're quite safe here, I promise," he thought he heard just on the other side of his consciousness.

Had he nodded? He had tried to, but his body was so very heavy now. A hand touched his forehead lightly, more like a feather or a misremembered dream, and then it was gone.

But then again, so was he—lost to the world of sleep.

. . .

Severus strode up to Minerva's quarters quickly, not really wanting to be away from his quarters with a Potter alone there—unconscious or not.

Well, that was a bit harsh, really. He was seeing more and more that Harry wasn't really anything like his father. Harry was far more truthful, and until this last unfortunate bout with young Mr. Weasley, the boy had always been loyal.

Unlike James and Sirius, the thought of them cheating on his kind Lily turned his stomach, and he very nearly had to make a side trip on the way across the castle.

. . .

They were on the seventh floor. Colin hadn't ever been up here, but then again, that might just be what saved them.

"Colin?" His younger brother stared at him, appearing far younger than he could remember him ever looking.

He was focusing on not gasping aloud with the pain he could feel pulsing through his body. He was nearly positive that he was bleeding, given that his trousers seemed to be damper than their circumstances warranted.

"Just give me a mo'," he said in a low voice, slumping against the stone wall tiredly. There was no one there besides them—not anyone they could see, at least.

Barely aware of the world around him, he didn't notice when Dennis began pacing fretfully up and down the corridor. He did notice an interesting tapestry just beside him, under which were written the words 'Barnabas the Barmy.'

"Weird," he muttered, closing his eyes against the light.

. . .

Dennis was very worried about his older brother.

He knew that someone had threatened them, and he knew that Colin didn't think McGonagall could help, but he wasn't sure of very much else. He had suspicions galore, but none of them could be easily substantiated in their current state.

Colin was almost certainly injured, but he didn't know what kind of injury would cause the sorts of problems that his brother was currently dealing with.

He was tired, but unable to sit still like his brother. He needed to be doing something, anything at all. As he walked up and down the hallway, he idly found himself thinking about what kind of place would be ideal for them to hide out in until their situation was more stable.

If they couldn't go to McGonagall, then could they go to Dumbledore? No. Dumbledore and McGonagall were tight; everyone knew that.

What about Flitwick or Sprout then?

Like Neville Longbottom, Dennis Creevey had discovered that he had quite a flair for plants, unlike his classmates or even his much revered older brother. He had found that time spent in the greenhouse, especially with Professor Sprout, was always time well spent.

He took comfort in her presence, and sometimes late at night, or those few times that he was alone with the woman, he would pretend that she was the mother he had never had.

Their own mother, a woman named Barbara, had disappeared when they were young. He knew that Colin had some memories of her, but he couldn't remember anything about her; no matter how hard he tried.

He had been all set on going to Sprout, but Colin had reminded him that the Badger's dorm was in the basement like the Slytherins, and therefore was inaccessible to them. If it hadn't been a Saturday, they could have found Sprout in her office, sure enough.

"We need somewhere that has a bed," he muttered softly to himself, looking back at his brother to see if he had seen him talking to himself.

Of course, going to Snape hadn't even been a consideration, not even for a moment!

"Someplace like a dorm, but one that has food and a bathroom even," he said just under his breath as he moved back up the hallway again.

If they had known where Harry Potter was, he knew that Colin would have gone to him in a heartbeat. Harry was good. Harry was the vanguard of the Light, for Merlin's sake!

"Somewhere that Harry can find us, if he needs to," he said, still thinking out loud, walking back down the corridor for the third time that afternoon.

Well, likely it's late afternoon, now—Dennis was stopped in mid-thought as a door that had not existed before suddenly appeared in the wall beside him.

"Colin?" He whispered, whirling back to look at his brother in surprise.

. . .

Severus sat in Minerva's quarters, a cup of tea in his hand and a scowl on his face.

"He is where?" The disgruntled woman in front of him said icily.

"In my quarters, as I believe I have already told you twice now," he said, his face getting darker at the way his colleague was arrogantly wasting his time. He had very nearly had it with her idiotic behaviors!

Gryffindors, he thought angrily.

"I thought that we had agreed that he should stay in his dormitory," she said with a look of distaste back at him.

"And until extenuating circumstances occurred, I had agreed with you," he said, putting his tea down with an audible CLUNK against the hardwood table sitting beside him.

"Those would be what precisely?" Her words were short, her gaze deathly.

"Health concerns," Severus answered testily, standing up with a whirl of his robes.

"This conversation is not over, Severus," she had yet to rise.

"Oh but it is, Minerva," he said, stalking to the door.

"He is still my student, Severus," she said, finally standing and moving towards him, ever graceful, even in her anger.

"You are willing to allow harm to come to your precious student then?" He snapped back at her.

"What harm?" She pressed two wizened hands to her hips.

"He is not safe here, in your house," he said in a low voice, thinking back to the atrocities that the child had admitted to him just in the previous twenty-four hours.

"What do you mean by that?" She asked, color coming to her cheeks.

"I mean that if he had been sorted into my house, I for one would have never allowed him to ever go back to those vermin that Albus calls his family!"

"I know that they are not warm towards him, but surely—," she was cut off by his increasingly irate temper.

"Has he told you anything about them whatsoever? Admitted anything about their treatment of him?"

Silence was his answer.

"You wonder why he is acting the way he is now, Minerva? This is why. If he cannot trust you to keep him safe, why should he bother speaking with you at all?"

Severus slammed the door behind him forcefully and stalked off down the hall, intent on getting to Dumbledore's office before Minerva did.

He had an idea of where to go with this, and he did not want the Gryffindor head of house poisoning Albus's mind against him even before he had a chance to speak.

. . .

Hermione knew that something was wrong. She was, after all, a very smart girl; one of Hogwart's brightest, even.

Time was moving oddly around her, reminding her somewhat of the year she spent with the time turner, only worse.

At least in that scenario, she had been in charge of the insanity; now, however, was another story altogether.

Besides, with the time turner, she had never lost any time; if anything, she had gained it.

She could only think of one thing that caused lost time, but she had always thought that having multiple personalities disorder was a muggle thing. Not only that, but she was fairly positive that MPD manifested early on, with some sort of traumatic event. Her childhood—so far as she could tell—had been fairly benign regarding such occurrences.

Then again, how could she know if she were the one experiencing it all?

There was only one other piece of the puzzle for her to base any theories on, and that was the strange lethargy that she found herself in after one of those lost time sequences. Ginny had noticed it that evening a few days prior, and she had garnered a few other odd glances from her house mates over the last couple of days as well.

Could someone be obliterating her?

It was an utterly mortifying and chilling thought. Was someone forcefully removing memories from her? And if so, how could she find out?

Not willing to wait any longer, Hermione set out from the dorm to find some answers for herself, lest she lose any more time on top of what she had already lost—or had taken from her, was her mind's frightening addition.

Anxious to be on her way, she did not notice the pair of eyes that followed her as she left the dorm. Nor did she notice that the portrait of the Fat Lady opening and closing an additional time directly after her exit.

First she tried McGonagall, but to Hermione's great dismay, her head of house was nowhere to be found. If she had left only minutes earlier, she likely would have run directly into the woman as she tore out from her quarters to head to Dumbledore's office.

But as it was, she did not and therefore completely missed her.

Something is wrong with me, she thought with a panicky feeling spreading throughout her body.

Where does someone go when something is wrong with them? She thought to herself, already heading in the correct direction.

The infirmary of course, she thought with a grim smile.

Her follower saw her smile and it made his blood boil. He resolved to follow her.

Nearly in a run, she made it to the infirmary in record time. She slowed down as she came within the sight of the infirmary doors, and then forced herself to calm down somewhat as she went through them.

"Madame Pomfrey?" She called out in a tremulous voice.

The woman she had most been hoping to find came out into the main area with a concerned expression on her face.

"Miss Granger? Is something the matter?" The short woman came quickly to her side and she nearly collapsed with the relief.

Quickly she explained all that had been happening to her—so far as she knew. Madame Pomfrey had indicated that she should sit down on a bed when she first began speaking, and now she instructed her to lie down altogether.

She was glad that someone was doing something, and that her fears had not been completely unfounded. In fact—she hadn't even discussed her concerns with the infirmary witch!

. . .

Initially, Poppy had been worried when the distraught girl had come into her domain, but now she was more than a little frightened at what the child had told her. Running a few diagnostic tests did not help her fear; in fact, they only made it worse as she started to become aware of the physical oddities present within the teenager's body.

It didn't take her very long at all to figure out that someone had been sexually abusing Hermione Granger.

And like Hermione, Poppy's mind quickly went to the idea that someone had been obliterating her to make her forget about it. It was also apparent that someone had also been healing the girl of the worst of her injuries, but as Poppy's scans easily showed, that unnamed person was clearly not a healer.

Outside the infirmary, Ron's eyes were narrowed as he carefully thought through all of his actions for the term thus far. He had little doubt as to why his girlfriend had gone to the infirmary. However, he was determined not to let it get in his way for his plans for that year.

. . .

"Severus, my boy! I must admit, I wasn't expecting to see you today," Albus stated jovially as he strode in without so much as a knock.

"Lemon drop?"

He sneered at the offer and for once, the headmaster didn't keep after him. Instead, he put the proffered tin back inside the desk—after retrieving one for himself, of course—and then sat back down to look thoughtfully up at him.

"I need to speak with the sorting hat," Severus said bluntly.

Surprise filled the other man's blue eyes.

"I must say Severus; that is an unusual request," Albus leaned back in his chair thoughtfully.

"Then may I?" Severus asked with a bit of urgency in his voice.

"Please," Albus waved him on interestedly.

Quickly striding over to the shelf where the hat was kept during the school year, Severus reached over for the magical object and promptly put it on his head. He hoped that at the very least, Albus might have cleaned the hat in between sortings, but he also knew better than to get his hopes up.

"Severus! How is Slytherin treating you these days?" The hat said brightly to him.

Severus sneered at the thought that the hat genuinely sounded happy to—er—see him.

"Better than some," was his short mental response.

"So you've finally gotten over your anger regarding Harry Potter?" The Sorting Hat sounded interested.

Severus despised having people—or things—rooting around in his brain, so he opted to answer truthfully in hopes that their conversation might be short.

"For the most part," he answered, barely holding back another sneer.

"Enough to help him even? My my, Severus, things certainly have changed since last we spoke."

"Gryffindor has no concept of how to protect him," Severus responded with a mental growl.

"I had wondered as much, but it is a pity that they have failed him as much as they have," the hat said, sounding sorrowful.

"If it was not the correct house for him, then why did he go there?" Severus asked, quickly latching onto the uncertainty that he had heard in the hat's voice.

"Because he begged me not to put him in Slytherin to begin with," was the hat's surprising answer.

He was distracted from their conversation as Minerva chose that moment to suddenly burst into the headmaster's office.

"Albus! Severus is interfering in the running of my house!" He heard the older woman shout out.

"Call for a resorting of the boy," the hat wisely suggested, amidst the hubbub around them.

"Can I do that?"

"Any head of house can, provided that the student is not in his or her sixth or seventh year," was the Sorting Hat's answer.

"Even if I am not the boy's head of house?" He asked, trying to make sure before he put the hasty plan into motion.

"Yes," the hat said emphatically in his ear.

With the hat still on his head, he turned and looked at Albus and Minerva, a new look in his dark eyes. They instantly quieted before him, and he took their silence as an opportunity to speak.

"Headmaster," he said, stating Albus's title formally in order to make the situation as official as possible. "I hereby do request that the Gryffindor student, Harry Potter, be resorted as soon as possible, this term."

The hat had fed him all of the words, and now his mind and the room were silent as the other two occupants stared back at him in open mouthed shock.

"A request of that severity must be seconded, Severus," was Albus's shakily spoken reply several heartbeats later.

"Severus, what are you trying to—," Minerva's indignant response was cut off as a voice interjected itself into their argument.

"I, speaking as the Sorting Hat of Hogwarts, do formally second the request made by one Severus Snape, potions professor and head of the Slytherin house," was the booming voice of the usually taciturn Sorting Hat.

"As the head of the Gryffindor house, I vote no!" Was Minerva's fiery comeback.

"As the headmaster of Hogwarts, I also must vote no, Severus. The boy is where he belongs. Why are you trying such a thing, my boy?" Albus turned grave eyes onto Severus's face.

"—Because something very bad is happening within the walls of Gryffindor, and the child is no longer safe," a new voice interjected, causing them all to turn and face towards the door.

Poppy had made her appearance.

"And like Severus and the Sorting Hat, I must also add my voice to this and vote in favor of the Resorting," she added with a somber expression.

"The majority has ruled," the Sorting Hat boomed into the empty silence of the headmaster's office. "At the next opportunity, the child called 'Harry Potter' will be resorted into what will hopefully be a better fit for him."

Severus gently pulled the Sorting Hat off of his head and placed it once more on the shelf. And then, in with a dramatic whirl of his robes, he left the still silent office and went back to his quarters.

Behind him, Albus turned back to Poppy and asked softly, "How exactly do you classify 'very bad'?"

His blue eyes were no longer twinkling.

. . .

Across the castle, across the hallway from the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, Colin and Dennis had stolen away within the room that no longer had an entrance. Dennis had made Colin lie down. He had not had much trouble with making his older brother obey him, but then again, he hadn't known the truth about Colin's state either.

Colin, for his sake, was more than thankful to have a reason to curl up in a fetal position, his back to the wall, as he lay on one of the two beds that were present there within the room.

It didn't even occur to him to wonder how it was that they had found such a perfect place to hide.

Chapter 10 – Resorting

"Albus," Poppy said emphatically after Severus had left the office.

"Perhaps you should leave, Minerva," he suggested softly to the other woman present.

"Are you out of what's left of your mind, old man?" She hissed back angrily to him, crossing her arms stubbornly.

A look crossed between Poppy and Albus, and finally the headmaster gave a reluctant nod.

"A female Gryffindor student—," Poppy began, only to be cut off by Minerva.

"Who, Poppy?" The older woman interjected tensely.

Poppy hesitated for a split second before replying softly, "Hermione Granger."

Other than a slight widening of her eyes, Minerva did not react.

"What happened, Poppy?" Albus asked.

"She has been raped, Albus," was Poppy's blunt response. A thump was heard from Minerva's direction as she dropped rather suddenly into the chair behind her.

"Who is the perpetrator of such a crime?" Albus's voice was strained, his eyes hard.

"She doesn't know," Poppy answered stiffly.

"What do you mean?" Albus had a death grip on the edge of his desk, but was otherwise calm.

"She has been obliterated."

"What?" Minerva answered furiously, her color quickly coming back after her shock.

"If I were to make a guess from what she has told me, I would say that your 'perpetrator' is a Gryffindor," Poppy added.

"How do you know that? If she was obliviated—," Minerva began before being cut off by a stern look from Albus.

"Every time she lost time, she always came back around in the same place: the Gryffindor dorm," the smaller woman answered with a spark of anger only visible in her eyes.

"What do you mean, 'every time'?" Albus said, catching onto her phrasing and leaning forwards. "Do you mean to say that this has not been a one-time event?" The man's eyes were burning with murderous destruction towards the unknown guilty party.

. . .

When Harry awoke, he did so without opening his eyes or making any sounds. He could hear the swish of robes somewhere nearby, which meant that his professor was back from his Harry related business. It both comforted and unnerved him to know that the man had gone to speak to his head of house about him.

He wondered if he could get away with going back to the safe confines of sleep, but before he really had gotten a chance to consider it, Snape was speaking to him.

"You've been awake for at least five minutes now, Harry," his professor said knowingly from nearby.

"Yes sir," he answered quickly, his voice still tired despite his nap. Slowly he sat up, wary of any lasting injuries. Despite the fact that they still hadn't healed the welts on his back, he felt much better than he had before falling asleep. He was a bit stiff, but that was a welcome change from the diet of steady pain that he had experienced for so long.

"Feeling better?" Snape asked, from the armchair beside him.

"Yes sir," he said, blinking slowly as he took in his surroundings.

Snape was holding onto a vial of some kind of cream, and he—rightfully—assumed that it was for healing the wounds still present on his back and upper torso.

"Then let me finish the job," the man said calmly, standing up and moving towards him slowly.

Snape's touch on his skin was gentle, and his motions were sure and steady as he worked around on his remaining wounds. Soon, almost too soon, the man was done with his job and Harry was carefully putting his shirt back on.

To Harry, being touched had almost always been linked with pain, but his professor's hands were anything but that. It was with little wonder that he found himself craving the contact after it was over.

It was also strange to think of a man as abrasive as Snape as being someone that he wanted to be around more, let alone feel more or less comfortable around.

. . .

Severus noticed the boy's change in temperament as he began applying the salve and was intrigued by the burgeoning trust that was slowly beginning to appear between them. The teen had seemed almost disappointed when he had finished with his wounds and put the salve away.

In order to easily reach all of Harry's wounds on his lower back, Severus had sat down on the couch directly next to the boy. He had planned on standing back up and putting some distance back between them, but seeing the lad hunched over and momentarily vulnerable somehow changed his mind.

"How do you feel now?" He spoke quietly, given their proximity.

"Much better," the boy said, turning green eyes towards him. "Thank you."

Severus could see the hesitant gratitude showing in the teen's face and was forced to look away briefly while something clenched hard within him.

"If you become injured again, you are to tell me immediately. Do you understand?" He added after turning back towards the boy.

Harry nodded slowly as though he understood the underlying meaning of what Severus was trying to say.

"Yes sir," the lad said softly, looking seriously at him.

"Your presence is required in the headmaster's office," Severus said carefully, silently wondering how the child was going to react to his news.

"May I ask why?" The boy hadn't moved, but something had shifted in his eyes, making him seem older once more.

"I have requested that you be resorted," he said, before standing up. He turned back towards the lad in time to see a tiny wrinkle of surprise flash across his face.

Severus watched as Harry broke his gaze to briefly look down at his now healed hands.

"What are you thinking?" He asked, dropping back down into a crouch before the boy.

"Do you think things would be better if I weren't in Gryffindor?" Green eyes stared intensely back at him.

Could it be that this boy really trusted him?

"I do," he nodded, still holding the lad's gaze. He chose not to mention the Sorting Hat's feelings on the matter.

"What if—," Harry broke off, clenching his jaw and fists almost simultaneously as he looked away from Severus.

"What if what?"

The boy didn't answer, and Severus responded by reaching out a hand and pulling the lad's chin in his direction. Miserable green eyes stared back at him, silently begging him to let the matter drop.

But he couldn't.

"Harry," he said in a more commanding voice, his hand still on the boy's face.

"What if no one else wants me either?" The words were spoken in a rush, almost too quiet to be heard.

Severus swallowed and narrowed his eyes in anger toward the headmaster, as well as the whole of Gryffindor.

"That will not happen," he said forcefully, lightly stroking the boy's face with a potions stained thumb as he waited for the inevitable argument.

"But what if it does?" The child was blinking hard at him, a mixture of bitterness, fear and anger present on his face as he waited for Severus's answer.

"If the Sorting Hat could find somewhere for me, then it most certainly can find somewhere for you," he said with a bit of a smirk, hoping to lighten the lad's attitude. Severus took his hand away and stood up again, this time followed shortly by Harry.

"Now go and get your shoes and robes on and we'll go to the headmaster's office together."

"Yes sir," the teenager said somberly before moving to comply.

. . .

"Albus," Minerva hissed after Poppy had left the room to go back to her infirmary. "You cannot be serious. The boy is my responsibility. How on earth can you possibly consider letting him change houses?" Her eyes glared at the man sitting across the desk from her.

"I didn't have any power over the decision," he answered wearily; the day's events already beginning to wear on him.

"You could have," she argued back angrily.

"Minerva, if the hat decides that someone ought to be resorted, then that person ought to be resorted," he said with a bit of fire in his eyes.

"So the whole ordeal of voting was nothing but a charade?" She exclaimed, ignoring his rising level of annoyance.

"Not charade—stall tactic," he corrected, standing up and putting his hands behind his back as he walked to the window.

"Don't tell me that you agree with them!"

Not looking away from the peaceful scene at the window, he answered, "You should be happy that he lasted as long as he did in your house, Minerva. The hat initially wanted to place him elsewhere." He finally turned around, staring back at her with a warning in his face.

"Where?" She demanded hotly.

He didn't answer; instead choosing to continue giving her that look.

"Hufflepuff would have been a joke to the boy," his colleague reasoned aloud. "Ravenclaw might have worked out in the long run, but certainly not at the start. And Slytherin—," here Albus raised an eyebrow and then returned to his seat.

"Slytherin—," Minerva tried again, only to be stilled by the tired look in his eyes. "Albus, you cannot mean it," she said helplessly, wringing her hands with the insanity of it.

"The only reason that the Hat did not sort him there to begin with was because he specifically asked it not to," he answered gravely.

"And now that has changed? Why?"

"I don't know the specifics of his past summer experience, but I fear that something drastic may have occurred," he admitted slowly.

"His muggle relatives were the worst sorts, Albus," she answered in a soft voice, her eyes going wide with the possibilities.

"Anywhere else and he would have been raised as a prince," he answered testily, going back to their old argument.

"You could have raised him, Albus! Or I could have! Even Severus would have been deemed fit for the job," she huffed.

"A child that precocious at our ages? Really, Minerva," he smiled knowingly at her.

"Precocious you say?" She answered by crossing her arms at him. "Tiny, shy, underfed boys are rarely all that precocious."

"So you did believe that there was a problem with his home life," he answered thoughtfully. "Why did you not ever speak to me of it like that?"

"You told me to trust you, so I did," she sniffed, standing up with a regal air.

"And do you now regret making that decision?" He asked carefully, narrowing his eyes at her.

She paused, looking at him thoughtfully before quietly admitting, "I believe that I do, Albus." Moments later, she exited the room without another word.

. . .

"Sir?" Harry asked him after a few minutes of walking together in silence.

Severus turned to look at the boy. "Yes?"

The boy was chewing his lip, eyes flickering quickly between him and the walls behind him.

"Harry," Severus said calmly, reaching up and pulling the child's lip out from between his teeth. A small blush appeared on the lad's cheeks, but his eyes quit their constant nervous roaming.

"Would it be possible for me to be known by my mother's maiden name, instead of Potter?" Harry blurted out quickly, his eyes now fixed steadily upon Severus's own dark amber ones.

Of all of the possible questions he had been expecting, this one managed to take him by surprise.

"Because of his betrayal to your mother?" Severus asked curiously.

"Amongst others," the teen's eyes had darkened once more and Severus found himself frowning against the change that it wrought in his face.

They continued on in silence for awhile longer, until Severus found himself speaking again.

"It wouldn't be too difficult to make such a thing happen," he said slowly, watching the boy carefully from the corner of his eye.

"Could you help me?"

Severus met Harry's eyes once more and was a bit undone by the hopeful look staring back at him through those familiar emerald orbs.

"Please sir?" The lad asked when he didn't immediately answer.

"If you want," he grunted.

"Thank you."

. . .

From the shadows, Ron Weasley sneered in disdain for the display he had just seen Harry put on for Snape.

Put on? He thought with an internal laugh. More like he was putting out.

So Potter didn't want to be Potter anymore?

Fine. He could handle that. In fact, it might fit in with his plans better than before.

With that thought in mind, he snuck back to the dorms and called an inter-house meeting.

As it happened, he just happened to call one on a day when both of his twin brothers were in the infirmary recovering from a nasty bout of food poisoning.

Was he lucky? Hardly. He made his own luck. He grinned at the thought and then moved on. His face was the perfect example of serious determination by the time the common room was full.

"Thank you all for being so prompt," he said, speaking smoothly before the large crowd of adolescents. "I called this meeting in order to make you aware of a few things. First, Hermione Granger—your other prefect—has been taken to the infirmary for reasons unknown." Here he smiled to himself, but managed to keep his outer face somber.

"At least, that's the official story," he added with a scowl.

Several people—especially the fifth through seventh years—nodded knowingly. They knew just how adept Dumbledore and his cronies were at keeping things from them.

And if they didn't know, they will soon, he thought with another mental snort.

"I've called you here today to let you in on the truth," he continued, his eyes scanning the crowd for anything resembling dissension.

"Hermione Granger was attacked, and if that weren't bad enough, I'm sad to inform you that she was attacked by one of her own Gryffindors," he snarled, looking around the room angrily. Everyone knew that they were an item, and therefore had the right to act the part of an upset boyfriend.

"Who by?" One of the third years called out.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, trying to make himself look pained. It wasn't too hard to do, all considering.

"It was Harry—Harry Potter," he said quietly before the room exploded into a chaotic hubbub.

. . .

The ride up the stairs to the headmaster's office was made in silence. Harry kept his mouth shut, feeling that he had already said too much to the normally taciturn man still standing beside him.

When the door opened to reveal a somber looking Dumbledore, he couldn't help but sneer at the man.

"Ah well, Harry my boy," the older man said, moving to place a grandfatherly hand on his shoulder. He skillfully dodged it and went to stand next to his professor, hoping that Dumbledore would quit with the concerned looks he was sending him.

He longed to say something to the old man, something that would put him in his place, but he feared that Snape wouldn't appreciate a blunt Gryffindorish display of disrespect, so he kept his mouth shut.

Though it didn't change his desire for revenge.

"I must say Harry, I had not expected to ever have to find myself in this situation with you," Dumbledore said slowly, ignoring the dark looks both Harry and Severus were now sending him.

"Then perhaps we could get on with it?" Professor Snape interjected nastily.

Dumbledore shot them both a mournful look, and it was all Harry could do to refrain from rolling his eyes at the ridiculous display of faux sympathy.

"I know that this is a very trying time for you," the headmaster continued on, apparently not willing to be swayed from his meandering course. "But I have every faith that you will succeed in this new set of trials, just as you always have done so honorably in the past."

Harry snarled back, and would have reacted in a more noticeable manner, if not for the steadying hand that had just appeared on his shoulder.

"Harry," his professor murmured in a low voice, giving him a warning glance.

He took a deep breath and forced himself to let it out slowly. As he did, the feeling of tension within his muscles relaxed and Snape's hand was removed from his person. Luckily for them both, Dumbledore had turned to retrieve the Sorting Hat, and in turn had missed both his anger and the Potions Master's warning.

. . .

They were all still shouting when Ginny stood up.

"SHUT UP," she roared, unconsciously doing a fair imitation of her mother, Molly Weasley.

They shut up and stared at her incredulously.

"Are you all seriously thinking about this dribble coming from my brother's mouth?" She scathed with a dangerous look in her eye.

Ron shot her a nasty look, but she ignored him.

"Harry is our friend. He's a Gryffindor, same as us. He wouldn't attack Hermione. That's insane."

There were others nodding their heads in agreement with her and she felt somewhat relieved. For a moment there after her brother had made the announcement about Harry, she had felt as though reality had just taken a nosedive of the side of the castle, never to be seen again.

"What about Cedric?" Someone muttered.

She whirled, trying to catch the offending person with her eyes, but it was to no avail.

"What about Cedric?" She replied scornfully.

This time, someone else answered her with, "Well, how do we know that Cedric was really killed by You-Know-Who? All we have to go on is Harry's word."

They were left looking thoughtful at that, and Ginny very nearly screamed aloud in frustration.

"The professors believed him," she said, gritting her teeth against the urge to hex them all.

"The professors are always on Harry's side," her brother answered, sounding far too calm, far too composed for her liking.

Ron had always been her least favorite—after Percy—but that hadn't meant that she would have ever thought him possible of something like this.

"What about Snape?" She countered, staring back across the room of students at her brother.

"I don't give a shit what Snape thinks, and I don't think that any self respecting Gryffindor should either!" He shouted, getting a round of applause from those around them.

"Slytherin slime!" Someone shouted out, raising a cheer from the room.

"Death eater wannabes!" Someone else shouted, raising a louder cheer.

"Dark wizards, the lot of them!" The room was on its feet, shouting as one.

Ginny looked out over the crowd with a feeling of helplessness bubbling up in her. Had everyone gone crazy?

There! There in the corner, she could see a crowd of tiny first years sitting morosely, watching the proceedings of the common room silently.

Fred and George, on the other hand, were nowhere to be seen. Why was she not surprised that they had chosen to miss an official house meeting?

"Harry's had detention with Snape for the past week," Ron suddenly announced in a lower voice, causing miraculous silence to abruptly appear within the common room. "How do we know that's all it is?"

The room was shaking their heads scornfully at this news.

"Why don't you ask him yourself!" Ginny yelled out to her brother angrily.

"I already tried talking to him! He petrified me and then beat the shit out of me! Like a coward, like one of those bloody Slytherins!" Ron shouted, just as the room burst into renewed shouts of outrage.

"Has anyone else tried talking to him?" She tried again, knowing in her heart that Harry wasn't bad. He just had a lousy life, but was that truly any reason to turn against him?

"You can't talk to him this year. He won't let anyone near him," Seamus said, causing her to shoot an angry glare towards him as well.

"Always sneaking out under that blasted cloak of his as though the rules are just there for everyone else!" Dean added with a sneer.

"He's even on a first name basis with some of the Slytherins this year," Ron added, making them think of the fight that Harry had intervened in earlier that year. "And sticking up for their first years against our own!"

Uneasily, Ginny noticed that the small group of neutral first years had dwindled quite a bit, until there were only two students sitting over there by themselves.

"He quit the Quidditch team," Angela Johnson called out testily, her face set in a scowl that was far too similar to one of Snape's own.

Gasps came from the majority of those in the room, and Ginny rolled her eyes angrily. Because of Harry's choice to quit the team, she had been given the opportunity to play Seeker. It was something that she had always wanted, but had known would never happen until at least her seventh year.

Likewise, she had known that while she would likely never be a favorite player of anyone's, at least she would still be given the chance to do her bit and make her mark. However, the idea of using her lucky break as an example of his disloyalty—well, that just riled her.

"—Know he'll never get charged with hurting Hermione," Ron was saying as she tuned back into conversation still going on around her.

She could hear the room grumbling, and quite suddenly, she found herself wondering where their head of house was. Why wasn't McGonagall there, doing something to stop all of this—this mutiny of her peers?

"We should go to the papers!" That was Andrew Kirke, a wannabe Quidditch beater. Ginny scowled mightily at him and he wilted before her glare. "Or not," he corrected himself in a strangled voice.

"No, for once my sister is correct," Ron smiled at her with a dark grin and she felt a small shiver go down her back. "This is Gryffindor business. All others need not apply," he said, unconsciously borrowing a muggle phrase.

"I've got an idea about what we can do to make him understand just exactly why he can't get away with hurting one of our own, but I can't do it by myself. I'm going to need everyone's help," he said encouragingly to the room.

Ginny was torn. On one hand, she didn't want to know about whatever awful plan he had for getting revenge on Harry. Other the hand though, she needed to know so that she could help her friend prepare for whatever was coming his way. He had already been through so much; surely he didn't need this piled on top of everything else.

. . .

When the headmaster handed Harry the Sorting Hat, he took it with steady hands, even though inside he was quaking with barely suppressed fear. He remembered his anxiety from his first year all too well; his trepidation for not being placed at all coming back with full force.

Just before he put the hat on, he caught a look at Snape's face and was rewarded with a nod from the stern professor. Snape believed in him, strange though it was. Well, if he could convince Snape, why should he be afraid about the rest of everyone else? His Potions professor had always been his most staunch opponent, after all.

With another deep steadying breath, he pushed past his fear and set the hat atop his head. Idly, he noted that it fit a touch better than it had as a first year, but that was all the time he had for such thoughts before the Hat began speaking in his mind.

"Ah, Mr. Potter—or rather, it's just Harry now, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Harry answered softly from within his mind.

"Have you finally decided to stop running?"

"I wasn't running," Harry argued back half-heartedly.

"Hiding then," the Sorting Hat corrected with a mental smirk.

"I don't hide—I survive," was his angry reply, his emotions bubbling through him fiercely.

"Perhaps it's time to do more than just survive," the Hat added softly. "I wish you good luck, child. I believe that you're going to need it."

"SLYTHERIN!" It bellowed out loud then to the anxiously awaiting room.

Harry took off the hat, blinking a bit fiercely at the sudden light—not because of any tears I'm trying to hide, he thought angrily at himself.

Dumbledore's sad visage was the first thing he laid eyes on, and he scowled at the old man. He handed the hat back to him and then turned to Snape—his new head of house—and instinctively reached out his hand towards him, and waited to see if the man would respond.

He didn't have to wait long, because soon Snape's hand was shaking his formally and he felt himself breathing a much needed sigh of relief.

"Welcome to Slytherin, Mr. Evans," was his professor's quiet greeting.

"Mr. Evans?" Dumbledore spluttered from beside them.

Oh yeah. That.

Harry shared a private smirk with Snape, feeling that he should take advantage of any chances for mirth before this got out to everyone else. It was likely to be the last laugh he ever had.

Chapter 11 – Aftermath

Harry's resorting was announced at dinnertime that same night, to the utter surprise of most of those present.

Shocked silence filled the hall, and then was broken with a shout from Ron Weasley, "Yeah! We don't want him anyway!"

Cheers erupted from the majority of the Gryffindor table, and then were quickly silenced by an irate McGonagall.

"SILENCE!" Her much magnified voice broke through the chaos.

Harry, who was standing next to Professor Snape at the front of the room, realized that his anger was causing the silverware to rattle around them, and forced himself to become calm. When the rattle had subsided, he sneered back towards his former housemates.

"Detention, Mr. Weasley," she said, speaking in clipped tones that only served to further illustrate the extent of her anger with the red haired boy.

"You have all shamed Gryffindor house with your actions tonight," she spat into the almost complete silence of the hall. "Now get out of my sight! All of you!" With a wave of her wand, the food that had been present atop the Gryffindor table abruptly disappeared, followed shortly by its students.

Harry noted with wary interest that Ron had not reacted after being reprimanded in front of the entire school. Rather, his face had become much stiller, his eyes the only part of his being that still looked alive as they stared straight at him.

. . .

On their way out of the Great Hall, Severus Snape tapped Blaise and Draco on their shoulders as he and Harry passed them. With a nod of his head towards the doors, he indicated that they should follow him out. His two fifth years obeyed without a word, neatly falling into step next to Harry, who was behind him.

He led them to his quarters, and then wordlessly motioned for them to go in. Once they were all inside and the door was shut, Severus

began unbuttoning his outer robes; a sure indication that whatever they were there for was likely going to take awhile.

With little hesitation, first Draco, then Blaise and finally Harry followed his lead, hanging their robes on the pegs next to his own.

He ushered them to his sitting area and then went to his kitchen to make tea.

. . .

Harry sat down next to Blaise on the couch, and watched carefully as Draco took a seat in one of the armchairs. The blond boy sank into it easily, as though he was completely at home there in their professor's quarters.

Hell, maybe he is, was his slightly bitter thought.

Harry swallowed and looked away from his long-time rival.

"Hey, you're looking pretty good," he heard Blaise say softly from beside him.

"Was that a come on?" He shot back half-jokingly.

A snort came from their blond haired companion, and Harry smirked.

"Don't kid yourself," Blaise answered, stretching his hands behind his head comfortably. "You are so not my type."

"Standards, Blaise?" Draco Malfoy interjected with a wry grin. "I wasn't aware that you had those."

"I wasn't either," Harry added, raising an eyebrow at his now spluttering friend.

"Hey, no fair. You're not allowed to gang up on me like that," Blaise argued, sitting back up defensively.

"Is it considered 'ganging up' if we simply have the same agenda?" Harry asked, looking speculatively at the other two Slytherins around him.

"I don't know," Draco looked at him with a thoughtful expression. "What is your agenda, anyway?"

Snape interrupted the conversation as he walked back in-between them, a tray of tea and other related sundries floating behind him.

Harry jumped up to help him with the tea, only to be waved off by an irritable looking Snape.

"I believe I know how to do this myself, Harry," his professor answered bit testily.

Harry sat back down. He wasn't offended by Snape's tone, if only because the man had continued to use his first name.

"Yes sir," was his automatic response. He shifted a bit uncomfortably as both Draco and Blaise glanced at him oddly.

"What?" He asked when they didn't speak.

"Harry, as a Slytherin, you needn't use titles for me when we're in my quarters," his professor informed him.

"So his name is 'Severus,' Harry. Try it out," Blaise said with a smirk.

Harry grimaced, and looked at the other three carefully to see if this was some kind of joke.

"So Severus," Blaise started, finally showing pity for his friend.

"Yes?"

"You think I have standards, don't you?" Blaise asked with an innocent expression, even while his companions broke out into laughter. Severus raised an eyebrow at them, and then turned back to the dark skinned boy beside Harry.

"Of course you do," their professor answered with a straight face.

"See?" Blaise crowed, looking smug.

"For instance," Severus continued without so much as a pause, "all of your pursuits," he cleared his throat, "are almost always alive and usually even humanoid in some form or fashion."

"Hey!" Blaise retorted with a blush while his classmates cracked up. Snape, on the other hand, merely leaned back with a cup of tea and an even broader smirk.

"Would you like me to continue?" The dark haired man asked with a small grin lighting his sallow face.

Blaise chose to respond in a very un-Slytherin fashion and stuck his tongue out towards Severus.

After the laughter had died down, Harry once more found the others' eyes on him.

"I think that Draco's earlier question was a valid one," Snape—no, Severus said. Harry wasn't sure if he could get used to that just yet, but it didn't stop him from trying.

"What's my agenda?" Harry asked slowly.

He received nods from the other three present.

"Survival, first and foremost," he said softly after a few moments of silence. He looked down as his hands suddenly became very interesting again.

"Harry," Blaise said from beside him, causing him to flinch in surprise. "Slytherin rule #1 – We never just settle for anything."

"Who's settling?" Harry whispered, as he stared off into space.

"Hey, none of that," Blaise said, punching him in the arm hard enough to jerk him out of the trance-like state that he had been falling into.

"Geez Blaise," Harry remarked ruefully, rubbing his arm and avoiding the steady gazes of the others in the room around him.

"Slytherin isn't a house to hide in," Draco stated, breaking up the uncomfortable silence that was beginning to build between them.

"I'm not planning on hiding. I'm merely going to be biding my time," Harry replied with a sneer towards the other teen.

"Until?" That was Snape—no, Severus, damn it, peering at him with those dark inquisitive eyes of his that seemed to bore into his very brain.

"Until I have an appropriate response," he answered with a scowl.

No, I won't be hiding, he thought coldly; a certain ex-best friend in mind as he brooded.

. . .

Draco Malfoy looked at the Boy-Who-Lived appraisingly as he tried to combine what he knew about Harry Potter with what he now could see.

This Harry was bitter, yet uncertain in his actions. He was shy, almost to the point of being withdrawn. He flinched when someone moved around him and there were dark circles under his eyes that were likely because of nightmares.

Merlin knew that he probably had enough reasons for them, between what Draco knew of his home life and the Dark Lord's quest against him.

"Potter," Draco began quietly.

"Draco," Severus said reprovably from his right.

"Okay sorry, Harry," he amended.

"No, Draco," Severus was still looking darkly at him and he shook his head in confusion.

"What?"

"Look at his nametag," his godfather suggested.

Evans? Draco thought wildly after taking the man's suggestion. He looked across at Blaise and saw surprise on his face as well.

Well at least it wasn't just me.

"He still gets his inheritance, right?" He peered closely at Severus and received a raised eyebrow for his trouble.

"He is still a Potter," Severus confirmed in a low voice.

"I just don't want to be known as a Potter anymore," Harry explained quietly.

"Good grief Harry," he responded, not bothering to see if Severus was looking on approvingly or not. "There are plenty of people at this school who would prefer not to be known by their families," he sneered at the thought of his father's dark legacy and the frequent trouble it had caused him throughout the years.

Deciding to go out on a limb for the sake of their newest snake, Draco admitted something that he had been thinking about for a while.

"I've even considered going by my mother's maiden name of Black," he said, looking carefully at the other boy.

He watched in trepidation as the other boy flinched and lost the little color that he had in his face.

"What?" He asked with another sneer, a bit hurt that Potter of all people would be judging him for this.

"Please don't," Harry croaked out, his eyes flicking back and forth nervously between him and Severus.

"Why do you say that?" Draco bit out testily, steadily ignoring his professor's warning look.

Harry agitatedly ran a hand through his long hair, and refused to meet his gaze as he stuttered out an answer.

"I don't want to have to hear that name while at school."

This confused Draco, and he didn't like it.

"Am I not good enough for you then? I know Black's your sainted godfather, but—," he didn't get any further. Instead he suddenly found himself on the opposite side of the room, his back pressed painfully against the wall with Harry's hand clenched around his neck, cutting off his air supply.

"Let me explain something to you," the other boy growled, squeezing his neck tighter. Draco didn't know how the smaller boy was doing it, but somehow Harry actually had him off the floor far enough to cause his feet to dangle.

He saw Severus and Blaise behind Harry, and he saw his godfather's mouth moving as he tried to get past the wards that the other boy had apparently thrown up around them.

"I hate him. I hate him more than I thought I ever hated you. I hate him more than my uncle or even fucking Voldemort," Harry spat at him, his green eyes burning dark with fury.

Draco couldn't breathe. Bits of black were pushing in around the edges of his vision, and yet Harry kept ranting at him in that fearfully quiet voice that somehow managed to remind him of his godfather on a bad day.

"I want him to rot; I want him to bleed. I want him to die," Draco barely heard him say harshly. Blood was pounding achingly in his head, and idly he wondered if his face was turning red.

Harry adjusted his grip on his throat, and he managed to grab a rasping breath before being cut off again.

"I would kill him myself if I thought I could get away with it. I'd take out a hit on him if I thought I could get away with it. I'd gladly torture him in a heartbeat if I had the chance."

Draco couldn't see anything of the other boy except his burning dark green eyes.

And then suddenly he found himself on the floor, coughing up bile in an uncultured way, while he gasped for air around the obstruction that was his throat.

Distantly he heard a door slam once, and then moments later slam again.

He didn't know what was going on. He just wanted the room to stop spinning.

. . .

Harry ran after dropping Draco on the floor. He didn't know where he was going; only that he had to get out of there before Snape took him out for attacking his beloved godson. He felt sick knowing that he had already screwed up his chance at a new life within the house of Slytherin.

He wasn't at all prepared to be yanked backwards by his irate head of house.

Snape had him by one arm and was dragging him backwards, causing him to stumble over his feet and nearly fall.

"You stupid boy," the man growled at him in a voice so low he almost couldn't hear it.

The portrait to his professor's quarters burst open without so much as a word from the older man, and Snape dragged him back through the place that he just escaped from.

Maybe it would be better for everyone involved if he just let Snape torture him to death.

. . .

Blaise watched in some surprise as Severus manhandled Harry back through the room. Blaise was crouched next to the still gasping Draco, but his heart went out to the defeated look that was on Harry's face.

Another door slammed and Blaise realized that Severus had taken them back to his bedroom, presumably to have some privacy.

At his feet, Draco groaned and clutched his head tenderly.

"Can't they stop with the door slamming already?" The blond haired boy moaned quietly.

Blaise smirked down at his friend.

"Looks like not."

. . .

Severus threw the idiotic boy down on bed and took a step back before beginning his reprimand.

"You stupid, foolish boy," he spat angrily, his fury enhanced by the fear he had felt when he realized that Harry had blundered out into the corridors by himself.

"The entire house of Gryffindor has declared war on you, and yet you ignore that in favor of your immature need for drama," he sneered down at the boy before him.

At one point it would have made him happy to see the lad flinch in response to his words, but that time was long past. He needed to make this child understand the seriousness of his situation, and he needed to do it quickly before he ruined the small amount of trust that they had managed to build between them over the last couple of days.

"Maybe it'd be better that way," the boy muttered from his perch on the side of Severus's bed. He watched in quiet unease as the child hugged himself tightly; likely trying to conceal the level of his body's trembling from his professor.

"Suicide by homicidal classmates," Severus sneered derisively, roughly pushing a sweat damped hand through his own dark locks. "Yes, I'm sure the newspapers will love that nearly as much as the Dark Lord will."

The boy cringed again and he silently cursed himself. The lad's face was nearly as pale as his own, but unlike Severus's features, this was an unnatural shade on the boy that made him look sick—broken even.

He sighed and walked slowly over to the bed. The boy twitched again, but he ignored it as he sat down beside him.

"Harry."

There, that got the lad's attention. Hesitant green eyes flickered towards his dark amber ones, and he couldn't help but sink into them a bit.

Terrible fear that Severus will hurt him, punish him, turn his back on him in favor of his beloved godson.

Wretched remorse for his actions accompanied by a deep self-loathing for everything that made up Harry.

Hopelessness.

Loneliness.

Misery—depthless pools of horrid misery and pain; all tempered by very real expectations of betrayal and rejection.

"Oh child," Severus whispered sadly, raising a hand and placing it gently on the boy's still too thin shoulder. Harry flinched, but he didn't remove his hand, and soon he felt the lad's tension release a bit under his still fingertips.

"Draco can be a fool. It is an unfortunate side effect of being a Malfoy, I'm afraid," he said quietly, still not letting go of the boy's shoulder.

"He's your godson. You lo—I mean, you care for him," Harry's voice shook.

"I care for all of my snakes," Severus said gently, moving his arm out to encompass both of the boy's shoulders.

The teen's tremors were more pronounced now, and Severus instinctively pulled Harry in closer to rest against his much larger body. The boy stiffened at the new position, but relaxed when Severus didn't move again.

"I think you should know," Severus said in a calm voice. "I have put in a great deal of effort trying to keep you alive. I shall be very annoyed if you die now. Just think; all of that hard work would have been for nothing. You know better than most how much I hate to waste my time," he gave the fifth year a rare grin.

"Yeah," Harry responded in a forlorn voice.

Severus watched in interest as the boy slowly inched slightly closer to him, until finally leaning over and resting his head on Severus's shoulder.

"I'm not saying that I don't want you to apologize to my idiot godson, but rather that the fool needs a few real world lessons in what can happen when one is unable to keep their mouth shut."

. . .

Snape—no, Severus—smiled down at him again and Harry felt himself relax just that much more into his professor's warm side. No one had ever held him like this, not even Molly Weasley. She had hugged him on multiple occasions, but not just held him. Never had he been able to relax into another's side with the knowledge that no harm would come to him if he did.

It was nice not to be rejected.

It was nice to just be able to sit and not worry about putting on a face for the others around him.

Several hours later, Harry awoke to find himself back in his own bed, the covers tucked in securely around his body. He thought back onto the tail end of the previous night and vaguely recalled Severus carrying him to bed.

The memory simultaneously warmed him and embarrassed him.

Using his wand to cast tempus, he realized with a start that it was already half-past six. He threw the blankets from his body and ran to the bathroom to take a hasty shower. Within ten minutes, he was bathed, dressed and had his bed made. It was only as he prepared to step through his door that he paused.

Intellectually, he knew that Severus was not like his uncle, but deep down he wondered whether or not his professor would want some form of payment for his caring actions the night before. He already felt guilty that he had not had enough wherewith to muster up a thank you to him for putting him to bed like some kind of child.

These were his thoughts as he hesitantly made his way into the main room of his professor's quarters.

The first thing he saw was Severus sitting at the dining room table, drinking a cup of tea. Harry's heart swelled uncomfortably within his chest as he realized that there was already another cup sitting at the place next to him.

Without turning around, his professor greeted him calmly with a, "Good morning Harry. Come, join me for a cup of tea, won't you?"

Harry didn't need any more encouragement. He quickly made his way over to the table and filled his own cup with the spicy aromatic tea that his professor favored. He brought it up to his mouth and breathed the steam in gratefully before taking a small sip. It was hot, but not to the point that it scalded his mouth.

It was lovely.

"Any longer and I was going to drop a house elf on your head," Severus said with a wry grin on his face.

"I can think of worse ways to wake up," Harry admitted softly, thinking of his uncle.

He watched Severus's eyes narrow and he felt another short burst of guilt for causing the man to feel anger—even if it was simply on his behalf.

Once again, Severus's arm found its way around his shoulders, and just like before, he felt himself relax into the warmth that seemed to emanate from his professor's side.

Well, even if he does want something in return, maybe it wouldn't be so bad if he keeps this sort of thing up, he thought to himself.

"Your uncle will pay for the crimes he has committed against you. I promise you that Harry. I will make sure that he and Black never have even the opportunity to touch you again. Do you understand me?" His professor growled against him.

Harry felt tears prick his eyes, but he blinked them away.

No, giving himself to Severus wouldn't be too bad at all.

. . .

Severus started when he felt the teen's smaller hand reach out and touch his upper thigh.

"Harry? What are you doing?" He whispered; his eyes wide.

"Thanking you," was the boy's whispered response.

Only seconds before the lad's fingertips reached the top of his pants, Severus's paralysis broke. He grasped Harry by the wrist and stopped him, pulling his hand up to rest on the table.

Wide green eyes stared at him and internally he cursed that whale Dursley down to the pits of hell where he belonged.

"I don't need—nor do I even want payment in that form. Not from anyone, but particularly not from you," he said, speaking quickly. He surmised that if his other arm had not still been around the boy's shoulders, Harry would have already bolted, based on the blush forming on the teen's thin cheeks.

. . .

Harry clenched his jaw down against his renewed urge to cry and turned his face down in shame.

He had thought—well, it was obvious that what he had thought had been wrong. Merlin, he was disgusting. Snape would be right to dump him and get rid of him while he could.

Stupid, worthless idiot freak, he mentally berated himself. Dumbass shithead, he continued until he felt two long fingers forcing his face upwards. He tried to steel himself against whatever he would find

looking down at him from Snape's face. He tried to shove himself back into the wasteland that had served to protect him so long from his uncle.

"Quit blaming yourself," were his professor's surprising words. "The blame belongs entirely on your worthless relatives' shoulders. I stand by what I said before; you need do nothing to repay me."

"But how else can I—," he cut off, unsure as to how to ask his question.

"You don't need to do anything, Harry," Severus looked at him with a thoughtful expression on his face. "But if you want to think of it like that, you can do this for me; stay out of trouble as much as you can, and don't ever wander off by yourself. All right?"

That was it?

His uncle had never given him so much as the time of the day, yet he had demanded so very much from him through the years. Now, in direct contrast, Severus had given him nearly everything that he'd ever wanted, and yet had demanded so very little.

It hurt Harry's brain a bit.

"Come, we must make an appearance in the Great Hall, and I want to see you eat, understand?" They stood up and went to retrieve their robes from the pegs next to the door. Harry picked up his backpack and put on his shoes, and they left.

As they walked, Severus explained to him that he wanted him to continue staying in his quarters for the immediate future.

When he asked what he would say to the other Slytherins, Severus calmly told him that if anyone asked, then he would tell them it was because of Harry's violent nightmares.

"I can tell them that you're to be staying for observation. However, it is rather unlikely that anyone will ask. My students understand about extenuating circumstances, and many have needed to stay for increased supervision' throughout their years here. Slytherins tend to come from homes that are often lacking in some form or another;

which is why they learn the skills that are needed for being place in this house to begin with."

They walked in silence for a bit longer until Harry broke the silence.

"The hat initially wanted to place me in Slytherin," he said in a voice barely louder than a whisper.

Harry didn't know that Severus had already been informed of as much by the Hat itself. Severus had no intention of letting go of that piece of information either. He knew about it, but he didn't know why.

"And it did not do so, because?" Harry's professor prompted.

"Ron had convinced me that it was a dark house. Plus, it was right after I had met Draco, and he had been a right arse to me. I begged the Hat not to put me there, and instead it put me in Gryffindor," Harry said with a shrug.

"Let me guess; you regret your decision now."

Harry barked out a bitter laugh.

"Understatement of the bloody year," he spoke with a dark look at the corridor they were still walking down.

"There is a muggle saying that I think applies well to your situation: 'Hindsight is 20/20,'" Severus told him.

Harry blinked up at him, surprised that the man had heard that phrase, considering its origins.

"Yes, I know about the muggle world," his professor said with a smirk after correctly interpreting his look.

Harry wondered if he could get the man to further expand on that statement, but before he had a chance to ask, he realized that they were standing at the entrance to the Great Hall. It was still early enough in the morning that there weren't too many students moving around them yet. For the moment, Harry and Severus were alone.

"Remember what I asked you to do?"

"Stay out of trouble and always stay with someone else," Harry repeated dutifully.

"A Slytherin someone else," Severus corrected softly. "After classes, I want you to go to the Slytherin common room. The password is Basilisk gaze. From there, go to dinner with the others, and afterwards we shall go back to my quarters together."

"What if we get separated and I get there first?" Harry looked up at him critically.

"Unlikely, but you're right, it could happen. In that case, you are to give this password: Ashwinder feet," Severus told him in a very hushed voice.

Harry smirked up at his professor and was rewarded with a return one.

Ashwinders didn't have feet. They were snakes, just like—well, just like them.

Chapter 12 – Speaking of Hell . . .

"Albus," Minerva said nervously. She had caught him in his office, just as he was leaving for breakfast.

"Can this conversation continue downstairs? I hear that the house elves are making blueberry pancakes this morning!" He said with a twinkle in his eyes.

"No, Albus." She looked at him ominously and his demeanor abruptly sobered.

"What's happened now?" He sighed, turning around and going back to sit behind his desk.

"The Creevey brothers are missing."

He looked up sharply at her words.

"Missing?" He asked in a quiet voice.

. . .

Harry's first week as a Slytherin was hell, but it wasn't because of the other Slytherins. It was the Gryffindors.

The first day had been relatively benign. The Gryffindors had hissed at him in the hallways and none of them would look at him. Fine. He could handle that. They had done much worse during his second year when everyone thought that he had been the heir of Slytherin.

The second day had been filled with much of the same, except that everyone had also seemed to go out of their way to bump into him.

Fine. He could handle that too. He got much worse from going to Hagrid's class. He got much worse from being around his Uncle Vernon.

On the third day, the Gryffindors had begun throwing minor hexes at him, as well as trying to trip him whenever he walked anywhere. Fine. He could handle that. It certainly wasn't any worse than trying to get to the Goblet of Fire—let alone escape from Voldemort and company.

On the fourth day, those minor hexes had morphed into heavier ones like Serpensortia—which he hadn't personally minded, but which had scared a number of other students and nearly caused a riot in the hallway around him.

More than once he had the leg-locker curse fired at him from unseen sources, and he had managed to either dodge or deflect them all but one of those times. He supposed he should have been happy that no one had yet tried something like the Entrails-Expelling Curse, but all in all, he just wanted to be left in peace.

It was all just fine though. He was fine. His fellow Slytherins were fine. In fact, they were more than fine. They had done what the Gryffindor house had never done, and had rallied around him. They had helped him watch his back, as well as keep the younger members of the house out of harm's way too. Draco and Blaise had permanently stationed themselves at his sides, even though he had tried to talk them out of it.

"There's no reason for you to put yourselves in harm's way! They're only after me," he had argued.

Draco and Blaise had exchanged a glance, but Harry hadn't bothered to try to analyze it.

"Yeah, they're only after a Slytherin. Why should the rest of the house care?" Blaise rolled his eyes with contempt at him and his ears had pinked.

"I don't know how things are in Gryffindor, nor do I give a damn," Draco had said next. "But you're a Slytherin now," he had poked a finger lightly in Harry's chest, "and we take care of our own."

And that had been that. The conversation had been over and things had continued on.

. . .

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration from within the safety of his office. Never had anyone in the school seen such enmity between the Gryffindors and Slytherins as what had occurred

over the last week. It hadn't even been this bad when he had been in school with the Marauders constantly after his blood.

These weren't pranks intended to amuse or humiliate, but rather a full-out attempt on the part of the Gryffindor house to purposely cause harm to Harry.

He knew that many of the other teachers within in the school were utterly shocked that the house of Gryffindor could be so cruel, but Severus knew better than most how real their actions were. All they needed was something to focus on, something—or someone—to be united against.

Since the matter concerning Hermione Granger was of the utmost and delicate secrecy, naturally the entire school knew about it. Furthermore, from what he could gather via some quiet snooping, he also knew that Gryffindor considered Harry its main suspect, and its actions as a house reflected that.

There was no doubt in his mind as to whether the boy was innocent; one only needed look at the boy in the eye and see that he was incapable of such a heinous act. In addition, several of the times in which Miss Granger was missing time coincided precisely with when Harry had been with him.

He had already handed out detentions to all of the major players in the situation—namely the Gryffindor fifth year boys. Ironically, or possibly logically considering the events at play, he had had no reason to punish the Weasley twins; at least not yet.

. . .

Friday dawned crisp and clear; the slight bite in the wind being the only foreshadowing of that day's danger.

Harry woke up with a start, pain in his head flaring as he opened his eyes, eliciting a small moan to escape his lips as his body became aware of its surroundings. Now awake, he gritted his teeth against the pain and tried to think back through the myriad of dreams that he had encountered the previous night.

He had dreamed something about a house and a man whose presence had bothered him nearly as much as Uncle Vernon's had. He tried to think, but the dream was quickly running away from him.

Damn it.

He carefully eased himself upright and nearly staggered as his headache blossomed even more fiercely in his temples.

"Bloody hell," he murmured to himself.

It wasn't as though the week hadn't been bad enough already, but now he had to make it through classes with one hell of a blinding brain squeezer. He glanced longingly at his bed, but he knew that it wasn't an option. He knew—or at least suspected—that Severus wouldn't mind letting him stay in bed, given his pain, but he couldn't allow himself to do it. Who knew what the Gryffindors would do if he were absent from classes? It had only gotten worse all week, and today wasn't likely to be an exception.

A knock at his door caused a barely noticeable wince through his shoulders and he forced himself to move quickly over to the other side of the room to open it. Light flooded his face and he nearly vomited from its intensity.

"Are you all right?" Severus asked him in concern.

"Slight headache," he managed to mumble out, propping himself against the doorway.

A black eyebrow rose in clear disbelief, and he knew that the man wouldn't let him go as easily as that.

"A slight headache?" Severus rumbled louder, causing him another wince.

"Something like that," he admitted in a pained voice, squinting at the man. He was barely aware of his professor as the man took him by the shoulder and led him back into the safety of the dark comfort within his bedroom.

"Are headaches this bad common for you?" Severus asked after seating him back on his bed.

"Time to time," he mumbled. "Usually has something to do with Voldy," he shrugged, immediately regretting the action as he did so.

Gentle fingers touched his head and he felt the very edges of his pain dissipate ever so slightly.

"Does it hurt here?" Severus's soft voice infiltrated his consciousness.

"Yes."

His professor touched another part of his head, and his answer was the same.

"Well," the man said after touching a few more spots, "considering your other symptoms, it would seem that you are suffering from a migraine. It's not too surprising, considering the stressors you've borne this week alone. Your best option would be to stay in bed. I can provide pain potions specifically brewed for headache relief—."

"No," Harry interrupted quietly.

"Why?" Severus looked at him with an unreadable expression.

"They'll think I'm hiding."

"Harry, what they think, and I use that term very lightly, is irrelevant."

"I—I know that Severus, but," he stopped and chewed his lip absentmindedly for a moment, "If I don't go to classes today, who knows what they might do to everyone else instead? I don't want anyone else in Slytherin to get hurt," he admitted in a very soft voice.

He felt Severus sit down beside him and he allowed himself to lean into the man's warm side ever so slightly. An arm came up around his shoulders and he sighed, wishing his headache would dissipate so he wouldn't have to have this conversation.

"Slytherin is capable of taking care of its own," the deep voice said quietly into his ear.

"You know me though. I attract trouble. That's what you've always said," he answered with a touch of uncertainty.

The man beside him sighed.

"I think you're giving me too much credit. I believe that what I said was that you sought out trouble; although you have since then proven me wrong."

Harry could hear a slight smirk in the other's words.

"I'll make you a compromise. Potions class isn't until this afternoon. Take the headache and pain potions this morning and then if you're feeling up to it, go to your afternoon classes. Otherwise, I want you in bed, understand?" He could feel Severus looking at him, even though the darkness of the room kept him from actually seeing the steady gaze on the man's face.

Harry turned his head against his professor's shoulder. He could feel the strength emanating from Severus's body and felt the slightest inkling of hope that the man could—and would—really be able to keep him safe.

"Okay. Deal," he said a few heartbeats later.

"Good lad," the arm tightened briefly before relinquishing its hold on him as Severus got up to get the necessary potions.

. . .

Ron Weasley opened his eyes that Friday morning with a jerk and a startled gasp as he sought to free himself from that night's series of nightmares. Strange, his dreams had been unusually good for the past few weeks, but the previous night's had most definitely broken that trend.

He blinked rapidly as he tried to get the images of the man out of his mind.

Unbidden, a name he had not spoken in some years came to his lips, and he grimaced as he said it.

"Rodney."

Bastard, was his mind's automatic addition.

The creep's face followed him in his mind as he got dressed that morning. It swung around the insides of his eyelids as he blinked, and made him growl as he strode through the corridors on the way to the Great Hall.

Suddenly, within his mind he heard the man's voice whispering in his ear, causing him an involuntary flinch that he had to fight from showing the others around him.

"Rodney and Ronnie, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G; first comes love, then comes bonding, then comes Rodney with a big ol' stiffy. Guess who's going to help him get rid of that, Ronnie?"

Ronald successfully stifled another shiver as he dropped unceremoniously to the bench, hurriedly piling up his plate.

By the time that Dean and Seamus had plopped down beside him, his emotions were once more under control, even if he could still hear Rodney's voice in his mind.

. . .

Richie Mondon was unhappy. It could even be said that he was upset. He knew that the upper level boys had something bad planned for Harry, but he didn't have any way of telling anyone. After all, who could he talk to, really? Dumbledore? That was a joke and a half. He hadn't done anything about Hermione, or the Creevey brothers, and he sure as hell hadn't helped Harry Potter out any.

And therefore, by association mainly, that ruled out his chance of being able to talk to McGonagall either. In fact, if anything, she had even been more clueless than the old man had seemed when he had been called into his office.

Clearly he couldn't just go and talk to Harry Potter, even if he had before, regardless of the circumstances. He wasn't sure exactly of what he thought of the other boy, but he certainly knew that he was worth a great deal more respect than that arsehole Weasley.

"What's up Richie?" A quiet feminine voice interrupted his brooding. He was in the Great Hall, relegated to the far end of the table like the other first years, only his spot was on the very farthest edge away from everyone else.

The only other person who would dare speak to him now as Cynthia, and thus it was with little surprise to see her seated beside him.

"Them," he nodded towards the other end of the table with a sneer.

She nodded thoughtfully, her eyes looking seriously into his own.

They were the only two, other than Ginny Weasley and her twin brothers that were not actively participating in Ron Weasley's boycott against Harry Potter. Richie wasn't sure whether Neville Longbottom was involved or not, but he would consider him guilty by association until he knew otherwise.

"I think we should tell Snape," she whispered very quietly into his ear.

"How?" He asked, his eyes searching over her face nervously. So far, they had only been given the cold shoulder by the rest of the house for not getting involved, but Richie was far too aware of just how quickly the scales could tip against them.

"I think I need to go talk to Teddy."

. . .

Theodore Nott—known to his few friends and family as simply "Teddy," raised his eyebrows in surprise as his sister joined him in walking out of the Great Hall after breakfast that morning. After being sorted into Gryffindor, she had had very little contact with him. It was to be expected, considering the tensions between the two houses—particularly this year—but it still had irked him.

"Do I know you?" The corner of his mouth turned up as she rolled her eyes at him. He offered his arm to her and she took it as they strolled down the hallway. He had left breakfast early, not wanting to get caught in the crowd, and they were almost completely alone now as a result.

It wasn't until they were more than a flight of stairs away from the Great Hall that his little sister said anything more than two words to him.

"Is there anywhere that we can talk? In private?" She shot him a meaningful glance.

"Sure," he answered with a touch of worry in his gut. His little sister was quite independent and had been so his entire life. If she needed to talk, then she likely needed help with something. And if she needed help with something, well it must be a very great problem indeed.

They went into an unused classroom and he warded the door with protection, silencing and secrecy spells. It wasn't until he was finished that she let out a breath of relief and wrapped her thin arms tightly around him. He kneeled down and hugged her back, suddenly very frightened about what her fear could mean.

"The Gryffindors are planning to attack Harry at the end of classes today," she whispered in his ear.

"Shouldn't you tell McGonagall?" He whispered back, stroking her back soothingly. He was her big brother and he knew that she was ultimately his responsibility. He'd fight to keep her safe in a heartbeat.

"She's worthless when it comes to her upper years. She won't see," his little sister said sadly.

"We should tell Snape then," was his quiet response. "Tell me what you know and I'll let him know as soon as I can."

"Thank you Teddy," she smiled and kissed his cheek.

. . .

Dennis Creevey had taken care of his brother ever since they had found their way into the mysterious room they were now stationed in. Colin had drifted in and out of sleep for the first two days, and in that time, Dennis had discovered something quite startling about his state of illness.

His brother's arse was bleeding, but upon further investigation, Dennis had realized that it was actually his brother's arse hole that was the thing bleeding. He didn't know what had caused it and for those first few days, he couldn't find out by asking his brother either.

The room was an odd thing too; whatever they needed, be it a water closet or just a snack, the room somehow managed to provide it without much beyond a thought. He wondered if he could call for a doctor—no a healer—but he didn't want to try without his brother's permission; although, if Colin didn't get better soon, he was going to try no matter what.

The third day of their exile seemed to be Colin's turning point though, and soon thoughts of doctors and healers had fled his mind as he took in his brother's new behavior.

"Den?" That was his brother's nickname for him.

He looked up in questioning from where he was currently bent over a book that the room had thought to provide concerning basic and simple healing spells.

"You—we? Haven't left this room, have we?" Colin asked shakily, his eyes darting to and fro throughout the room.

"Nuh uh," Dennis shook his head in the negative. "You said not to," he added quietly, creeping to his brother's side silently.

"Good, that's good," Colin answered quickly, not looking at him. He seemed to be talking to himself more than anything else, and it only added more fear to Dennis's gut to watch him be so withdrawn.

Especially with me, was his worrisome thought.

"Colin? Did someone hurt you?" He whispered nervously. He wasn't sure if he was more afraid of his brother's reaction to his question or whether his fear stemmed directly from the answer itself.

He watched as Colin tensed up against the headboard of his bed.

"Col?"

The other boy scooted over in the bed and patted the empty spot next to him. Dennis hurried to comply and soon the two lost brothers were wrapped tightly around one another.

"You know who Ron Weasley is, right?" He could feel Colin shaking beside him and he tried to hold on that much tighter in hopes of settling him down.

"Yeah?"

"Well, listen here and listen good. You can't ever be alone with him. Don't ever go anywhere with him, don't ever talk to him even. If you see him coming, you run, get me? Run to a teacher, anyone except maybe the headmaster. I used to think he knew everything, but he doesn't—how could he?" Colin was muttering more to himself than to Dennis, but the younger boy listened carefully anyway.

"Maybe if he knew everything it'd drive him mad and then we'd all be screwed," here Colin barked out a disturbing sounding laugh, and Dennis tried not to shiver at the sound.

"What about Professor Sprout?" Dennis gave voice to his hope.

"Yeah, she's safe. Women are safe. Well maybe not McGonagall. Yeah, don't go to her. Go to Sprout. Snape. Flitwick. Flitwick's tiny. He can't hurt us. Snape's scary but he doesn't ever touch anyone. Go to him. Or Harry. Go to Harry. That's a good idea," Colin was rambling in his ear and Dennis couldn't but help shake with renewed fear.

"Are you sure you're okay, Col?" His words slipped and shuddered within his mouth and it took him two tries to get his question out.

His brother barked another laugh and Dennis felt his insides go cold.

"I'm not okay. No. Not okay, definitely not okay," his brother broke into hysterical giggles.

"Colin?" Dennis wrapped his arms tighter around his brother and closed his eyes in an effort to keep the tears from escaping. Someone had hurt his brother badly and it was all he could do to stay there with him in hopes that his presence would calm him down.

. . .

MUGGLE BORN ATTACKED WITHIN WALLS OF HOGWARTS!

And then underneath the blaring headline read another slightly smaller one:

HAS HARRY POTTER GONE DARK?

Sources within Hogwarts have provided startling new evidence suggesting that this seems to be the case! "Everyone knows that he did it," Prefect Ronald Weasley told me when I interviewed him. As you know, Ronald Weasley had been one of Harry Potter's best friends since his very first year. However, this year seems to be the turning point within their friendship!

"I don't associate with dark wizards," Weasley added seriously, his eyes troubled and concerned over the loss of his friend over to the dark side. As most should know, the Weasley's have long been stalwart supporters of the light. If anyone would notice something going wrong in Harry Potter's troubled career, they would be the ones to spot it!

The muggle born student, also a fifth year prefect, was brutally attacked whilst in the Gryffindor dorms. Shortly thereafter, in a move that many have called "shocking" or just downright "ridiculous," Harry Potter was resorted into Slytherin! As you know, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named belonged to this very house during his own school years at Hogwarts. Many of the dark wizards who later aligned with him were also sorted there.

"Death Eaters in training," several students told me from the other houses within Hogwarts.

"They're creepy. I hate to have one walking down the hallway behind me for fear of what they might do," Seamus Finnegan told me.

"Cheaters and rule breakers, the lot of them," Devin Thomas, another Gryffindor said when asked about his opinion of the dark house.

How could Harry Potter have gotten so out of line as to be associated with the house that singlehandedly sought to make him an orphan? More on this story as it develops.

Rita Skeeter reports

. . .

"Oh shit," Draco breathed as they opened up the Daily Prophet that morning.

He looked around to see how everyone was taking it and swallowed hard against the influx of dark looks that were suddenly pointed their way.

He glanced up and down the Slytherin table and realized that everyone was present, minus two fifth years: Teddy Nott and Harry Evans. Professor Snape was also absent and he hoped that the man was just late and not in trouble, or as their luck would have it, dealing with trouble.

"This is bad," Blaise said in a low voice just audible to those sitting around him.

Draco looked at him and nodded, trying to keep from rolling his eyes at the sheer obviousness of the statement. It didn't do any good to have them turning against one another now.

. . .

At the head table, the professors present were upset and arguing amongst themselves. Dumbledore and McGonagall had arrived late, but just in time to learn firsthand of the Daily Prophet's maligning statements.

"This is complete codswallop, Albus!" Flitwick squeaked in an outraged voice.

"You must make a statement to the students," Minerva hissed to him, her anger clearly palatable in her face.

"Harry's not a dark'un!" Hagrid moaned lowly, his large eyes staring down the table at Dumbledore.

"This isn't just an act of libel against Mr. Potter. This is libel against the whole of Slytherin!" Sinistra spat furiously, her pride for her house coming through in the dark look in her eyes.

However, before Albus had gotten a chance to speak—let alone taste the delectable blueberry pancakes that were in fact sitting within arm's reach of his plate—the room abruptly became completely silent. He looked up to see that his irate Potions master had made his entrance.

In one hand, the man clutched a crumpled paper, and behind him stood a wary looking Theodore Nott. However, Severus's face was the most noticeable thing about him; his lips white with fury and his eyes narrowed with terrifying intent.

"Albus, I request a private word with you now." The man turned around and left, taking Nott with him and Dumbledore stood up slowly, his joints creaking loudly in protest.

"If you will excuse me, my dear?" He said mildly to a still gaping Minerva as he left the table.

Chapter 13 – Downhill

After a quick discussion with his Slytherin, Snape had sent Nott back to the Slytherin table, and then had stalked after Dumbledore up to the man's office. The door had just latched behind them when he began to speak.

"Albus," he spat, just steps behind the old man.

He didn't wait for his employer to turn.

"You will fix this. You will make this right."

"Has Harry seen it yet?" Albus asked calmly, finally moving around to look at Severus.

"No," Severus growled. "But he will. And do you know what he'll wonder? He'll wonder why the headmaster isn't doing a DAMN thing to stop this! You are the head of the Wizengamot, are you not!"

"What would you have me do? Obliviate everyone?" His employer said in a frighteningly calm voice.

"You are a fool, old man. Everything you've worked for since the Dark Lord's downfall is going to become moot when Harry learns of your betrayal."

Personally, Severus thought that Harry had already made up his mind about the old man long before this, but he wasn't about to say such a thing now.

"Whose side are you on? You're certainly not on Harry's," he growled.

. . .

A hand was shaking him from his slumber.

"Severus?" Harry mumbled into the darkness around his bed.

"No, it's me, Draco."

"Is Severus here? What's going on?" Harry asked, trying to wake up. His headache was mysteriously quiet, but perhaps it was just the additional kick of adrenaline.

"No, he's with the headmaster. He sent me here to find you. The Weasel told a pack of lies about you to Rita Skeeter, and now the Daily Prophet is trying to pin the fault of Granger's attacks on you."

"What!"

Okay, he was definitely awake now, even if they were still talking to one another in the dark.

"Lumos," he muttered, lighting a small lamp beside his bed.

He could see the other boy's face clearly now in the soft light, and judging from Draco's somber expression, it was obviously not a joke.

"That's not all," Draco paused, taking a seat beside him.

"There's more?" Harry asked incredulously. His stomach was already slopping in his shoes; just how much worse could it get?

. . .

"The Daily Prophet has all but declared Harry to be the next Dark Lord!" Severus snarled out at the headmaster.

"We should be thankful that he is not then," Dumbledore answered, moving to sit behind his desk finally.

Severus's anger was making the knick knacks on the shelves rattle.

"Why shouldn't he be? What has the Light ever done for him?" He asked in a dangerously soft voice.

"I would think Harry mature enough to see the answer to that. After all, we were not the ones to make him an orphan," Dumbledore shot back with a harsh look at his potions professor.

"No. You just stood by while his uncle nearly killed him."

"But didn't," Dumbledore answered, a new light shining in his ancient blue eyes. "Harry's a strong boy."

"Listen to what you're saying. He is only a boy, Albus! You are giving him plenty of fodder to use against the Light. So the Dark Lord killed his parents, so what! His memories of that time are inconsistent at best," he glared at Dumbledore as the old man tried to interject.

"You will listen to me for once in your existence, Albus," he hissed angrily. "He may not remember the death of his parents with crystal clarity, but he is aware that the Light never tried to protect him while he suffered with his wretched relatives!"

"So he didn't fit in well with his family; sometimes these things happen, Severus!"

"And that was a good enough excuse to beat him? To starve him? To treat him like a house elf throughout his childhood?" Severus paced back and forth in front of Albus's desk, his fury heating up his chest.

"Tell me old man," he had stopped abruptly. "Does rape just happen?"

"What are you talking about?" Severus was pleased to see that Albus's eyes had lost their previous shine.

"Rape. I'm sure you are aware of what it is, yes?" He sneered cruelly. "Does it just 'happen sometimes,' Albus? Yes, the Dark Lord may have killed Harry's parents, but you are every bit as vile, old man, for standing by and doing nothing while Harry was raped by his uncle."

There. He had laid his cards all out on the table. The old man had better respond appropriately, or Severus felt that he would surely explode.

. . .

As it happened, the Weasley twins and Ginny were very angry with their brother and the rest of the house. So, they tried to confront him about it.

"What the hell is wrong with you!" Had been the twins' approach.

"I'll tell mum what you're up to!" Had been Ginny's tactic.

Ron's response had been cool, collected; a direct contrast from their angry and hysterical words.

To the twins, he had threatened to speak to Molly regarding the seriousness of their plans to go into opening a joke shop. They had scoffed at him, but he had turned a serious glare right back onto them.

"Would you like me to mention that you've been testing your future products on unsuspecting students? I'm sure that will go over well," he had sneered.

And to Ginny, he had been even more vicious.

"Tell Mum and I'll make Percy visit you."

The idea that he knew how horrid that threat was—the idea that he knew why such a threat was so meaningful to her, was all too much. She had slumped against the wall and slid down it slowly while her brother had walked away whistling.

That night she had nightmares not too dissimilar from Harry's own.

. . .

Disgusted by the interminable silence his warnings caused, Severus Snape gave the old man across from him one more glare, and then turned on his heel and opened the door to leave. He did not expect to come face to face with one Remus Lupin. Lupin's hand was in the air poised to knock, while his face was graced with a look of surprise.

"What are you doing here?" Severus growled; his patience for idiots long gone.

"Dumbledore invited me," was the wolf's infuriatingly calm response.

"Better you than me," he sneered angrily.

He tried to pass by, but was stopped by Lupin's hand catching his arm.

"Don't touch me," Severus hissed, trying to pull his arm out of Lupin's—surprisingly—strong grip.

"What did you mean?" Lupin's amber eyes stared calculatingly at him.

And then it hit him. Severus suddenly found himself grinning a very bitter grin—one which could possibly be classified as "insane," if the other person didn't know any better.

"Tell me Lupin," he looked directly into the other's eyes and was pleased at the sudden wariness that his change in temperament had caused appear. "Harry Potter is important to you, is he not?"

From behind him, he could hear Dumbledore clear his throat loudly. They didn't have much time to finish this conversation taking place in the doorway of the old man's office.

"He's my cub," Lupin said softly, the wariness increasing in the man's eyes. "I saw the paper today," he added, rage briefly flitting across his otherwise stoic face. "Is he alright?"

"The Prophet is just at the top of your cub's concerns. I tried to get Albus to do something about the more pressing of them, but instead he chose to brush me off," Severus said, dropping his voice into a barely audible octave.

"Like what?" The other man growled, the wolf coming closer to the surface as his concern for his "cub" increased.

"Like rape," Severus snarled, loath to continue breaking his snake's confidence like this, but left with few other options.

Well, he thought to himself ruefully, there are very few legal options left to me, at least.

"WHAT?" Lupin howled, his eyes darting over Severus's shoulder to the old man still sitting patiently at the other side of the office.

"No need to get angry at him, Lupin. At least, not yet anyway," Severus said, his mind working quickly to bend the situation around to his liking.

"If not him, then who?" Lupin snarled.

Severus leaned in and put his mouth next to his old schoolmate's ear. "Personally, I'd start with your friend, Sirius Black."

The horrified expression that Lupin made was priceless, and Severus reveled in his ability to create such blood thirst with so few words.

Then deftly, without Dumbledore noticing, Severus maneuvered a small vial of Veritaserum into Lupin's front inside pocket. "To make sure," he whispered. The other man's nostril's twitched ever so slightly, and then he gave Severus an almost imperceptible nod.

Satisfied that at least some of his work was done, he stepped aside to allow the other man full access into the headmaster's office, and then headed back down to the dungeons.

. . .

"I thought that we agreed Sirius was not to be left alone with anyone? And yet you left Harry with him anyway?" Remus snarled at Dumbledore moments after shutting the door behind him.

"It was just a short visit," the wizened man in front of him said in a soothing voice.

"What part of not leaving him alone with anyone did you not understand!" Remus shouted; his insides contracting painfully as the reality of the situation began sinking in.

"Harry's his godson. Surely you don't think Sirius would have done anything to harm him," Dumbledore answered as though he thought Remus's idea to be very foolish, if not altogether silly.

"Albus, I appreciate everything you've done for me, but let's admit it. You need to get your head out of your arse and start seeing the world as it really is!" He shouted. Remus didn't wait for a reply, but instead strode quickly to the fireplace and retrieved a handful of floo powder from the small jar atop the mantle.

"Where are you going?" Dumbledore called out, finally out of his seat.

Remus threw the powder down and shouted out, "Grimmauld Place!" He turned and looked at Albus and added, "If you're not willing to face the truth, then I will!" And without further ado, he stepped through the green flames.

The drab surroundings that greeted him were to be expected, but having Dumbledore follow him through was not. Luckily for them both, Remus had already stepped further in the room proper, and thereby avoided what might have been a very uncomfortable landing.

"Sirius takes his responsibilities as god-father very seriously, Remus," Albus admonished in a quiet voice beside him.

"Open your eyes man! Azkaban changed him, and not for the better," Remus hissed back angrily. Of all people, he certainly knew better than most different his old friend was these days.

Remus walked forwards lightly, not wanting to set off the vile portrait of Sirius's "esteemed" mother. He found Sirius in the kitchen, sharing a cup of tea with Kingsley Shacklebolt and Tonks. Actually, as he eyed the scene in front of him, he realized that Kingsley and Tonks were the only ones actually drinking; Sirius, on the other hand, was staring morosely into his cup.

"Headmaster, Remus!" Tonks said by way of greeting.

Kingsley merely nodded at them both, face tired. Idly, Remus wondered what kind of trouble Sirius was getting into here, in addition to what they already knew about.

"Remus?" Sirius's voice was low, disbelieving.

"That's right Padfoot," he answered softly, going over to crouch in front of the man he'd once been very close to. He wondered if the entire situation wasn't just karma from the time that Sirius almost killed Severus with Remus.

"Moony," there were tears in the other's eyes. "I miss him so much," Sirius whispered.

"Who?" Dumbledore interjected, forever stealing into their privacy.

"James," Sirius and Remus said simultaneously, earning them a look from the rest of the room's inhabitants.

"Sirius, I want you to do something for me," Remus said, speaking very calmly as he tried to ignore the presence of the others around him.

Sirius didn't need to try. He had already forgotten that they weren't alone.

"Anything for my Moony," he grinned, a bit of lasciviousness coming into his face.

Remus also pretended not to see that.

"Open your mouth and stick out your tongue," he instructed.

Sirius's eyebrows wiggled as though Remus were suggesting something sexual, but he did as he was told.

Quick as a flash, Remus's hand had whipped out the vial of the veritaserum, and dropped three drops onto his former mate's tongue.

"What did you do!" Sirius had pulled his tongue back in and was looking at him as though he couldn't quite believe what had just happened.

"Consider it a present from a mutual acquaintance," Remus all but snarled, standing back up with a slight grimace.

"Where did you get that?" Dumbledore demanded.

"Does it matter?" Remus's smile didn't reach his eyes, let alone his heart.

At the table, both aurors were watching the proceedings carefully, but were currently keeping their mouths shut. Remus hoped that would continue to be the case.

He turned back to Sirius before Dumbledore could waste any more time, and saw from the slightly glazed look in his ex-mate's eyes that it was time.

"Who is Harry Potter?" He asked, starting out with easy questions first.

"My godson," Sirius answered in a monotone voice.

"When was the last time that you saw him?"

"This summer," Sirius answered.

"Did you enjoy the visit?" Remus's voice wavered ever so slightly on "enjoy."

"Yes."

If what Severus was saying is true—No, Remus wasn't going to finish that thought.

"Who are Harry Potter's parents?"

"Lily and James." Sirius's fingers twitched as though he were trying to fight against the drug.

"Did you love James?" Remus said, talking quicker.

"Yes."

"Did you have sex with him?" Remus caught the looks of surprise that the question caused on the others present.

"Yes."

"Did he cheat on Lily with you?"

"Yes."

All things you knew, Remus, he told himself angrily, annoyed at his mind's inherent tactics at procrastination.

"Did you have sex with Harry Potter?"

Time seemed to freeze as Sirius's hands twitched again, a bit more violently.

"Yes." Sirius closed his eyes and slumped a bit as though he had realized the futility of his fighting now.

"Did he say no?" Remus's voice was hoarse, and from the lack of sound in the room, it was clear that the others were holding their breaths.

"Yes." Sirius sounded beaten, lost. Those present had resumed breathing.

"Did he cry?"

"Yes."

"Did he beg you to stop?" Remus asked through gritted teeth.

Another pause.

"Answer me!" Remus yelled, stepping forwards and grabbing Sirius by the front of his shirt.

Sirius finally opened his eyes, and Remus saw that the serum had worn off from the relative clarity he could see looking back at him.

"Yes he did."

Remus threw Sirius back into his chair, no longer willing to touch the disgusting creature before him.

He ran a hand through his hair and then turned back once more. There was one more thing he wanted to know that he hadn't been able to ask while Sirius had been under the effect of the drug. Open ended questions weren't usually well received with veritaserum in one's system, but if Sirius was still in the sharing mood, there wasn't any reason that he couldn't ask now.

"Why?"

Silence.

Remus was on the cusp of leaving this man to the fate of the others present when Sirius finally gave him an answer.

"Because I missed James—I miss James still! They look so much alike, they are so similar," Sirius made a whining sound in the back of his throat. "And he was so good. So tight."

"BE QUIET!"

Remus blinked in surprise at the unexpected anger coming from the man beside him. Dumbledore had risen up to his full height and was staring down furiously at Sirius still huddled in his chair.

"I entrusted you with his safety, with his care!" The twinkle was gone from the headmaster's eyes, and Remus was rather glad he wasn't the old man's focus at present. Wisely, he took a few steps backwards, and peripherally, he could see Tonks and Kingsley doing the same.

"And this is how you repay me?" Dumbledore had made his way across the room and had hefted the man out of his seat, pushing him up against the wall with one gnarled hand around his neck.

Magic crackled and roiled around them. In particular, Dumbledore's hair almost seemed alive as it whipped about in the space above and around his body, like some kind of silver lightning.

"Your godson, Sirius Black! Have you no sense of duty or honor? You disgust me."

Everyone in the room winced and they watched as the remaining blood drained from Sirius's face.

Dumbledore released his hold on Sirius's throat and allowed him to fall to a heap on the floor. Abruptly, the electricity and tension in the room simply vanished, and Dumbledore turned to Kingsley with an unusually somber look on his old face.

"I think that it is high time that the aurors caught up with Sirius Black."

...

Harry made his way through the hallways with Blaise and Draco flanking him. Nott stalked behind them with Millicent and Pansy; each looking as if they were capable of eating children for fun. If the mood for the previous week had been volatile, then the mood that day was absolutely explosive. Harry hadn't been experiencing much difficulty with the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws before the article, but now it was clear that the entire school had united against the house of Slytherin, and him in particular.

The teachers were actively roaming the hallways, but there was only so much that could be done against hundreds of angry magic wielding children.

Thankfully, the other fifth year Slytherins had met Harry and Draco at the door to Severus's quarters. Harry and Draco would have never been able to field the array of hexes being thrown at them if they had still been alone.

Before they had left, Harry had voiced his concern for the younger snakes, but Pansy had assured him that it had already been taken care of. The sixth and seventh years had taken on the responsibility of chaperoning the first through fourth years to all of their classes, with the understanding that the fifth year would stick together.

Overall, Harry was amazed at the unity within the Slytherin house; not just now in the face of a crisis, but in general as a whole.

Even though Snape's quarters were in the dungeons, they were still a good ways away from their classroom. By the time that they finally made it to Potions, Harry's head had begun pounding again from the maelstrom of flying hexes, angry faces and physical attempts to cause them and other snakes harm.

When Severus finally strode into their classroom, an unusually murderous expression on his sallow face, Harry's head felt as though someone was attempting to saw it in half. Squinting, even though the lights were never very bright down there, Harry saw a look of concern cross over his head of house's face.

He felt almost certain that his pain was the reason that Snape decided to have a theoretical session that day, rather than a practical one.

"Put your books and wands away," Snape barked at the class, glaring at a few of the Gryffindors when they stared stupidly back at him. "We are discussing theory today. I have no doubt that what comes out of most of your mouths will likely be as amusing or pitiful," here he glared at Weasley, "as what some of you write in your essays."

"Mr. Malfoy, name three ingredients used in the Befuddlement Draught," Snape snapped out, whirling on Draco like a black bat.

"Sneezewort, scurvy-grass and lovage," was Draco's calm response.

"5 points to Slytherin," Snape smirked at him, and then turned around to glare at Lavender on the other side of the room.

"Ms. Brown," he called out in a silky smooth baritone to the suddenly terrified looking girl. "Tell me, where might I find a Mackled Malaclaw? And what potion could I use it in?"

The Gryffindors eyes widened, but surprisingly, Lavender answered the first question correctly, with a quietly spoken, "On the shoreline, sir."

"And the potion?" Snape looked down at the girl with a glare; his expression exactly the same as it was before she answered a question right.

"I don't know sir," she shook her head wildly, her eyes frightened.

"Not able to divine the answer from any of your little cohorts, were you? Pity. 5 points from Gryffindor."

Snape turned back towards the Slytherin side once more, and barked, "Mr. Zabini!"

"Sir?" Blaise looked up with an interested look in his eyes.

"Please enlighten Ms. Brown as to what you would use a Mackled Malaclaw in," Snape instructed him, a nasty grin lighting his face for a split second before vanishing.

"Felix Felicis," was Blaise's crisply spoken answer.

"Very good, 5 points to Slytherin," Snape said tersely, turning back towards the other side of the room.

Harry was glad that he and Blaise had studied far ahead into the upcoming year's curriculum. Felix Felicis was a sixth year potion. He doubted that Lavender or any of the rest of the Gryffindors even knew that.

Well, other than Hermione, he thought ruefully, thinking of his bushy haired ex-friend. She was still in the infirmary, and from he had heard, would be until they figured out who obliviated her.

The rest of the class continued on around him as his headache continued beating his brains into what felt like little more than barely congealed goop. By the time that Snape called on Neville, the Slytherins had racked up nearly 30 points and the Gryffindors had lost more than twice that.

In the world outside of his migraine, Harry had distantly felt a bit of happiness at seeing the Gryffindors so bowled over by the Slytherins, but that feeling now vanished as he watched Snape start in on Neville. Of all of the Gryffindors other than the Weasley twins and a few others, Neville had been the only one from his year who had not yet turned on him.

Perhaps Snape knows that too.

His suspicions were confirmed when he heard the question that his professor threw at Neville.

"What three main ingredients are used in the Draught of Living Peace?"

Poor Neville, Harry thought as he watched his shy clumsy friend tremble.

"P-P-Powdered moonstone," the other boy finally whispered after a few heartbeats of terrified silence.

"And?" Snape's tone was merely clipped and not nasty as it had been with the other Gryffindors.

"S-S-Syrup of hellebore," Neville finally choked out, causing eyebrows to go up around the room.

"And?"

"P-Pine," Neville's face crumpled on itself and Harry commiserated from a distance. It was obvious that the other boy's mind had just gone blank.

"P-P-Pine needles," Neville finally said.

"Pine needles?" Snape asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Uh, no! Pine cones!" Neville tried to correct himself, sensing from their professor's dark expression that he had answered incorrectly.

"You must pick one," Snape answered in a syrupy smooth voice that sent involuntary shivers down everyone's spines.

"I don't know, sir! I don't know," Neville whimpered, holding his hands in front of his face as though he expected Snape to hit him with something from the other side of the room.

"Which is it then, Evans? Pine cones or pine needles?" Snape asked; his dark eyes completely fathomless as he turned towards the Slytherin side.

"Neither," Harry responded dully, still slumped forwards with his head in his hands.

The class gasped at what they were certain was an idiotic response to what should have been a simple question.

"Explain." The instruction was terse, leaving no room for discussion.

"The use of pine cones or pine needles is redundant, provided that the moonstones have been crushed completely and adequately into an extremely fine powder, and then mixed with the graphorn powder, rather than added separately," he said tiredly.

"According to whom?" The voice Snape used was dangerously soft, but it no longer frightened Harry the same way it did the rest of the class.

"The latest researchers."

"Humour me. Specifically whose research?"

"Yours sir," he said, finally squinting painfully up at the man, trying not to wince at the light now filtering in around the blinding edges of his migraine.

The room was shocked absolutely silent. Was he actually right about this? Or was he just making it all up? But if he was making the information up, why would he cite Professor Snape as his source?

"Well done, Evans." The man said grudgingly after another moment, a modicum of respect in his tone. "10 points to Slytherin," Snape said with almost an invisible nod, before turning around in a flash and glaring down at the rest of the class.

"Class is dismissed."

Harry smiled weakly at the man's back, before closing his eyes back against the pain, allowing the darkness to claim him once more.

A/N - Reviews are like jelly in my PB and J . . . ice in my slushy . . . heat in my baked potato? Er . . .

Chapter 14 – Past Wrongs

After having travelled to Grimmauld Place that morning, Albus Dumbledore was finally back in the safety of his office. With a sigh, he slumped into the chair behind his desk and put his head in his hands. He was fully disgusted by all that he had seen and heard that day, and it wasn't even dinnertime yet.

Then of course, there was the question of, "What now?"

He knew that Remus had gotten his information and the Veritaserum from Severus. And damn the man, Severus had been right about what Sirius had done. So what else was Severus right about? Could Harry's Uncle really have done the same thing? Could he have been that blind as to have missed something so serious?

Albus ran his hands through his hair once again. He already knew the answer, but worse yet, he was afraid that he had known the answer for some time.

Severus's words from that morning had stayed with him throughout the whole of that awful interrogation, and now in the quiet of his office, he heard them again.

You are a fool, old man. Everything you've worked for since the Dark Lord's downfall is going to become moot when Harry learns of your betrayal.

It had never even crossed his mind that Harry would turn against him. Oh, he had understood that Harry would be angry at him from time to time, especially in some of his more difficult choices, but he had never entertained the idea that such a thing would grow into anything more—anything worse. Of course, now that he understood more of what had happened to Harry, it was easier to make the leaps of logic required to see why the boy had turned out the way he had.

Fawkes trilled mournfully from behind him and he slumped even further in his seat.

"You're right, old boy," he admitted very softly. "Your owner is a wretched creature."

Fawkes trilled indignantly. He hadn't said that!

Dumbledore stood up wearily, feeling very much his age as he walked the short distance over to where his familiar was perched.

"What do you suggest then?" Dumbledore asked as he sadly stroked Fawkes' fine plumage.

Fawkes put his head down thoughtfully and then trilled a long and detailed message straight to the mind of his owner.

Albus's eyes got wider as he listened and before too long, he was looking back at his old friend with a surprised expression.

"Perhaps I ought to listen to you more often," he mused to himself.

Hawkes gave a very pompous sounding trill that made Dumbledore chuckle.

"Well if you feel like that, maybe I'll just retire and let you deal with the idiot politicians!"

Hawkes squawked indignantly and flew to the other side of the office in silent protest.

"Don't worry my boy. I wouldn't even wish that Severus. Although as we both know, he certainly would take care of them."

. . .

Dennis Creevey's hands were sweating as he paced nervously back and forth across the room that they had hidden themselves away in. His brother was on the other side of the room from him, slowly barricading himself away in the corner with various pieces of furniture. Dennis glanced back at that side of the room and shook his head in confusion. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the room hadn't had that much junk when they had initially found it. Somehow, the room had understood Colin's need to hide and had managed to slowly provide him the means with which to do so.

It didn't seem like the room was sentient, but then again, what did he know? To a point, Dennis figured that all things magical were sentient—or maybe it was just the magic that was.

In all actuality, he was right on both counts; magic was sentient to a point—although that point hadn't ever been agreed on by any of the leading magical theory scholars—along with the room itself. In fact, after such an extended stay within its walls, the Room of Requirement had decided that it quite liked its occupants and was finding it easier and easier to bend to their wishes—voiced and otherwise.

From the Room's point-of-view, the two boys were quite cute in their own individual ways, and It had rather enjoyed watching them cohabitate within Its space.

On the other hand (ignoring the fact that rooms typically don't have hands), It also was aware of the many searches that the professors and staff had made of the castle looking for the two boys in question. While the castle herself was under the jurisdiction of the headmaster, the Room of Requirement, being an unusual sub-facet within the overall hierarchy that existed amongst the stationary structures, managed to slip through that control, and for all intents and purposes, was an independent being (more or less). To put it more concisely, as long as the two boys stayed within the Room of Requirement, they could not be located by the headmaster, let alone any others, with only one exception: Harry Potter.

With that one loophole firmly in place, the Room set to watching and listening to the machinations of Dennis's mind with great care and interest. There was nothing that frustrated It more than being shown a need and not being able to supply a response.

Dennis was aware of some of the limitations of the room; the most important being that it apparently could not bring living creatures into its space. Unfortunately for Dennis, given his muggle background and general magical isolation, was not yet aware of floos—although that certainly would have allowed them to deliver a message, if not transport them directly. However, even if he had known about floos and their uses, it would have merely created an entirely new set of problems to be dealt with. For one, because of the sensitive matter contained within the message, they wouldn't have been able to send it to just anyone. Anywhere that Ron Weasley had access to would have been ruled out immediately, and the same went for any of the teachers.

So flooding was out, regardless of Dennis's lack of foreknowledge.

What they needed was damningly simple; they needed Harry to come and find them. Short of actually leaving the room itself, that was the only way that they could end their isolation.

Dennis considered the methods of communication within the wizarding world, but couldn't come up with anything that didn't involve owls. He thought it likely that there was some form of wizarding ESP available out there, but he didn't have any way of finding out from where he was. Colin would likely know, but his brother had been more and more taciturn the longer they had stayed in the room, and he was hesitant about trying to get him to talk if it wasn't necessary.

His thoughts on his brother now, he worriedly glanced over to the corner of the room where Colin had hidden himself away. He had been worried enough when his Colin had turned his bed on the side and started sleeping hidden away from him, but was only a mild beginning to the path his seclusion had ultimately taken. Following the sideways bed, his brother had furthered his barricade by putting a fence of upended tables around his space, the sides of the tables creating an uneven wooden wall that faced outwards towards the rest of the room. Dennis had watched Colin meticulously stick each table together using a sticking charm, before doing the same thing with wooden doors laid topside across the legs of each. Following that, Colin had then repeated the process all over again, adding another row behind the first, and then sticking them together as well. Now, he was using that as a base to build atop, using tables again, making it sturdier and stronger as he went. Somehow in that time, the room had swelled up, allowing him the space within to work, but without making either feel claustrophobic.

Dennis sat down on the floor away from Colin's massive creation and hugged his knees tightly to his chest. To be honest, his brother had begun scaring him, and he was afraid that things would get worse before much longer. Colin still wouldn't talk to him about what happened, but he had a few guesses, none of which made him feel much better about any of it.

. . .

Rita Skeeter, despite what many believed, was actually quite intelligent. Some of her readers would have surprised to learn that in her Hogwarts days, she had been much the quiet, solitary bookworm; rather like what Hermione Granger might have turned into if not for the influence of Potter and Weasley.

She could not understand why other people—usually loud and obnoxious people—assumed that not talking was the same as not listening.

In school, she had used her intelligence gathering skills for her own use, but as an adult, she had taken them quite a bit further. And truth be told, she enjoyed cutting those around her down a bit.

Personally, she had no problem with Harry Potter, but professionally, she tended to see money signs when she looked at him, and as a result tried to take her stories about him as far to the edge as she could.

There weren't many people who were willing to get in her way about it either, but later in the morning after her debut of the scandalous Mr. Potter being resorted into Slytherin, she found herself staring down her editor and longtime colleague—if not friend—Charles Rozalsky.

Although he was noticeably older than when she had first started working with him, there wasn't much about Charles that had slowed down or lessened with age. His eyes were every bit as piercing and critical as they had been fifteen years ago, and although she would never tell a soul, she still managed to find herself intimidated by him.

"Retract the story? Are you mad?" She was currently screeching at him.

"We've been offered a deal by Dumbledore himself," Rozalsky's eyes burned into hers with a hard strength quite unlike Dumbledore's own damnable twinkle.

"A deal?" She stood up, her sharp fingernails clicking impatiently against her hips.

"Black," he stated pointedly, leaning over her desk with a menacing air.

"For Potter," she stated, trying to sound unenthusiastic.

"Don't try to look at me and tell me that you don't give a damn. I know you Rita," Rozalsky said in an accusing voice.

"And what do you know?" She asked, turning her back on him purposely.

"Severus Snape isn't the only one with secrets about how Black and Potter treated him during their school days," was his damning answer.

She whirled back around, her eyes sparking with anger, even if the rest of her demeanor was calm.

"You know, some men retire when they begin going a bit barmy upstairs," she said with a vindictive bite to her words.

"Black has been caught. Want to insult me some more? Or do you want to be the sole reporter to interview him before he's Kissed?"

The possibilities whirled through her mind quickly at his words. Rita Skeeter, an exclusive with the only man ever to escape Azkaban. She had to hand it to Charles for making his offer as tempting as possible. So what if she retracted her story on Potter? The readers had already seen it, had already made up their minds. The corner of her lips twitched upwards ever so slightly. Potter would be around for a while longer; Black would not be.

What did she have to lose, really?

. . .

Harry moaned aloud as he thrashed in his bed in Severus's quarters. After class, his potions master had carried him back to his—to their—quarters, and after supplying him with more pain relieving potions, had left him to sleep the migraine off. At first, Harry's sleep had been untroubled and calm, but as the pain had lessened, the dreams had begun and now he was fully in the throes of a nightmare.

His uncle was chasing him through Grimmauld place. In his bed, he rolled over on his side with a whimper and curled up into a fetal

position. So many stairs, he couldn't remember there being so many stairs there in the Black ancestral home, but now there were and he could feel a stitch starting in his side from his efforts to get away from the angry muggle who by all rights should have fallen behind ages ago.

Ahead he saw a door and he raced towards it, not thinking about whose door it was, but just that he had to get away from what was behind him. Hurtling through the door, he slammed it and it magically locked behind him. He only had enough time to catch two, maybe three breaths, before noticing that he wasn't alone in the room. Sirius was sitting on the side of the bed, dressed only in a ragged pair of boxers. He was looking at Harry as though all of his Christmases had happened at once and Harry swallowed against the bile that mysteriously had begun rising in his throat at the implications behind the thought.

His hand fell on the doorknob just as Sirius began walking towards him, but it wouldn't turn. Distantly he could hear the slobbering breaths of his uncle panting harshly on the other side of the door, just waiting for him to come back out and . . . play.

"No, no!" He cried out in his sleep, not even waking as a crack of light spilled across his bed from the door that was opening slowly across from him.

He looked up in the dream once more and realized with a sick start that Sirius was no longer on the bed, but instead was standing right beside him, his hand reaching for him.

"I don't want to," he whimpered, still asleep; pulling away from where Severus had carefully sat down on the edge of the bed.

Harry was frozen in place against the door, his hand not quite clenching the knob as Sirius hooked his thumbs in his ragged boxers and slowly pulled them down. He wouldn't, he couldn't look down. He didn't want to see, didn't want to know what was about to happen, didn't want to know what Sirius was about to do. In his bed he whimpered again, causing the look in Severus's eyes to sadden just that much more.

The dream shifted and abruptly he was in Sirius's bed, completely naked with Sirius atop him, writhing against his body. No wait, he

was wrong. Sirius wasn't writhing, but rather it was his cock that was. Harry finally looked down, only to see that in the place of his godfather's cock, there was now a long green snake, moving back and forth over his own groin. His eyes bugged out at the thought of that entire thing going inside him and he once more tried to get away. Sirius's body was too heavy, he was too small and he screamed a bloodcurdling cry as the snake pushed its way inside him.

Harry's eyes flew open with a start and he threw himself upwards against the headboard, his arms trembling as they wrapped themselves around skinny legs and knobby knees. He couldn't get the sensation of the hissing feel out of his body. He could feel it traveling through him and he shuddered, tears dropping down over his cheeks.

Just when he thought he could take no more, warm hands made themselves known on his shoulders and he stiffened as they drew him in to rest against an equally warm body.

"Severus?" He asked, hating the way his voice shook as he voiced his question.

"Yes," the man's voice was low and it rumbled against him, allowing him to melt into Severus's protective side with a relief filled sigh.

Not quite daring to grasp at the man with his hands, Harry contented himself with the encompassing way Severus's arm was holding him. Even so, he was still shuddering and tears were still leaking out of his eyes as he tried to wake up fully from the horrid nightmare.

Above him, he heard a muttered lumos, and soon the bed was lit with a soft glow just right for the early morning.

"Did I wake you?" He hiccupped, hating his obvious weakness.

"Does it matter?" A large calloused hand came up to lightly brush the hair out of his eyes and he choked against the sudden rush of emotions he felt through his body at such a simple motion.

He tried to answer, but couldn't, so he nodded swiftly instead, feeling the other man's head against the top of his own as he did.

"Why?" The question was whispered softly above him.

"I don't—I don't want to bother you," he answered thickly.

"Child," he could hear the smirk in the man's voice, "you have annoyed me throughout the years with your pranks and after hour wanderings. Trust me, in comparison with that, this is very little bother.

Harry tried to smile through his tears as he nodded his understanding.

"Come, I think it's time for some tea," Severus told him in a voice that allowed for no argument.

. . .

Severus looked at the small teen sitting next to him in the living area of his quarters. The boy looked miserable, his face white from the nightmare and his fingers shaking every time he reached for his mug of hot tea.

"I'm sorry for being so pathetic," the boy had the gall to say in the silence that rested between them.

"Pathetic?" Severus quirked an eyebrow at him curiously, knowing all too well what the boy meant by that.

"You know," Harry said in a near whisper, his shoulders slumping in a little more, "Worthless. Wretched. Disgusting. The usual."

"The usual," Severus stated in a non-believing voice.

"I've tried telling myself that I don't care about all of that," the boy's voice hitched for a moment, "but it's getting harder to do."

Severus listened and waited carefully for the child to get to his point. He had a feeling that it wouldn't be too much longer.

"And why is that?" He finally prompted when Harry didn't continue on.

"It's hard to go back to not giving a damn when someone like you seems to think I matter."

Severus waited.

"You're just so on top of things," Harry was hugging himself tightly again and it was all the older man could do not to touch him. "There are so many things that you don't give a damn about, but that's okay because it's you. So when something does matter to you, then it means it matters a lot. And for some reason, I seem to matter to you." The teen shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "But I can't matter a lot, because if I do, then it means that all of me is important, including my problems. And if my problems are important, then I can't just ignore that, because you aren't."

"Explain to me why it is important not to care," Severus asked in a calm voice.

"Because it hurts too much to care. I don't want to hope for anything else, since once you figure out how awful I am, you'll never want to be near me again."

"And in what way are you 'awful'?"

"I'm dirty. I'm stupid. I'm worthless. I told you," the boy hitched another breath. "You're none of that and I'm all of that, and once you figure out how much of that I am, you'll see that it's no good to care about me, 'cause there's nothing you can do about that. No one wants me and you shouldn't waste your time thinking that I matter enough to make someone want me," Harry finished, turning his head the other direction from where Severus was still seated.

Making a decision, Severus pulled the unresisting boy down sideways and placed his scruffy head in his lap as one would do with a much younger child.

"That's right, Mr. Evans, feet up on the couch, thank you very much," he instructed in a commanding tone, even as he started running his fingers through the lad's messy locks.

"So you think you are not worthy enough to be wanted, is that what I am hearing?"

He got a shaky nod from his lap and felt the wet heat of tears begin to soak through his pajama pants.

"And you think that anyone who would dare think you mattered would be wasting their time on that pursuit, yes?" He did not wait for the nod this time, but continued on. "As the definition of pathetic states, it is something that engenders pity within other people. Listen to me Harry when I tell you that I do not pity you. I do not envy you either. Conversely, as time goes on, I am finding myself admiring you more and more as I discover just how stout your constitution is. Yes, you heard right. I admire you, you silly boy."

The teen draped partially across his lap only shuddered.

"You do not get to tell me what or whom I find important. Do you understand me?"

Another shaky nod atop his thigh signaled the boy's confirmation.

"You are very important to me, little brat, and I will be angered greatly if something happens to you."

"Even the Dark Lord?" The question was muffled from Harry turning his face into Severus's knee, but his inquiry is still understandable.

"Especially if the Dark Lord happens to you. Given the choice between the two of you, you win hands down," Severus leaned over, trying to catch the lad's tear filled eyes. "No contest."

"What about Draco? He's very important to you."

"He is," Severus admitted softly, still stroking the boy's hair lightly. "But he is not more important than you, just as you are not more important than him. You are equally important to me."

The boy was shaking his head no, as though trying to nonverbally dissuade him from his outrageous belief.

"Harry," Severus said in a voice that caught the boy's attention immediately, stilling his head shaking as well. "You are not dirty. You are not worthless. You are not stupid," he intoned, staring straight into the teen's eyes with each proclamation.

"You don't know, you don't know," the lad was whispering in near shock.

"I do know, Harry. And eventually, you'll know too," he stated sadly, leaning back against the soft cushion behind him.

. . .

Dennis couldn't sleep. The problem of communicating with Harry had taken over his consciousness, leaving him wired and if truth be told, a bit anxious. Lying in his bed with the covers pulled up tight around him wasn't helping, so with a sigh, he slipped out of bed and found the slippers that the room had conjured for him.

Colin hadn't spoken to him in more than twenty-four hours. He could still hear him moving around behind his barricade though, so he wasn't too worried about him yet.

Much, was his additional thought.

Ignoring the problem of his brother for the moment, he asked the room for a cup of tea and then moved over to an armchair to sit and think.

What they needed was an owl, but since an owl was living, they couldn't summon one. If they were farther along in their studies, then perhaps they could conjure one, but they weren't, so it was a moot point. Everyone in Gryffindor knew which owl was Harry's, and most of them understood how smart and devoted she was. If he could get her to come to the room, then it wouldn't matter where Harry was, because she would be able to find him no matter what.

He could probably get the room to summon her perch for him, but would that lead the owl there? He doubted it.

What if he asked the room for one of her feathers? If a feather suddenly disappeared from her coat in a magical burst of energy, wouldn't she be curious as to where it had gone?

Dennis shook his head and rubbed a hand over his eyes. He didn't know. It'd be a long shot to try out, but if he didn't have any better ideas soon, he might go ahead and try.

Finishing his tea, he put it down on the table that had appeared beside him and stood up with a tired grimace. He wasn't getting

anywhere in his plans. He ought to just go back to sleep. He started heading that way, but instead of stopping and getting in his bed, he continued on past it. Colin's structure was looming in front of him and he couldn't help but be a bit curious by it. The creation was like some kind of large wooden castle and he admired his brother for his imaginative skills.

Peering a bit closer, Dennis realized rather belatedly that there was door in the middle of the quasi-building, and when he got closer, he realized that it was cracked open just a touch.

Had Colin meant to leave that open?

He stepped closer and hesitantly pushed against the opening. It swung open easily enough.

Almost like opening a door to another realm, was Dennis's excited thought as he stepped forwards through. It was dark inside, but not completely, and his thoughts of tiredness quickly flew from his mind as he investigated the space around him.

"Col'?" He asked the semi-darkness around him.

No answer.

The structure around him was very sturdy and seemed to extend farther than he had thought possible from the outside.

Must be the room again, was his logical thought.

Because of the table legs above and below him, he had to be careful where he put his feet and head as he walked. But since he was still so small, even now as a second year, he didn't have to worry about ducking his head as he moved through the enclosure. Remembering that his wand was still in his pocket, he pulled it out and cast *lumos* in hopes that he could see his brother.

Still nothing. Frowning, he moved forwards a little quicker, the table legs reminding him a bit of the rafters that were present in their attic at home. Holding his wand over his head, he peered forwards and nearly wet himself when he realized that Colin was standing not two feet from him, eyes glinting in the wandlight.

"Col'?" He squeaked, shakily. "Are you okay? Geez, you scared me!" He admonished.

"Sure Dennis, no problem." His brother answered, moving closer to him.

He didn't know why, but suddenly he felt like taking a step backwards. Something about his brother was scaring him.

"You sure? You haven't been out in a while."

"Been busy," his brother smiled at him and he couldn't quite smile back. "I've finally figured out how to keep us safe."

"Yeah?" He whispered, trying to inch backwards without being noticed.

"Yeah," Colin answered with another resolute looking smile. He stepped close enough to Dennis to attach a clammy hand to his arm and then pulled him forwards. Dennis stumbled at the sudden motion but even with the threat of pulling them both down, Colin didn't release his arm.

"Colin, you're hurting my arm," Dennis panted out fearfully.

"Sorry," Colin answered, not easing his grip.

"Where are we going?" He asked as Colin pulled him through the maze of objects. They passed a tall gate made out of nothing but chairs that they got through by crawling under; Colin crawling while dragging Dennis behind him easily.

Beyond that was a room full of pipes of varying sizes, open holes facing them like some kind of gargantuan beehive. Several were large enough to crawl through and after seemingly picking one at random, they climbed up and Colin pushed him through it, following a moment later.

Dennis slid downhill in the dark tube for less than ten seconds, but it felt like much more. Finally it dumped him on a soft floor on the other side, Colin landing beside him mere seconds later.

"Light," Colin said in a near growl from beside him and he hurriedly tried to get his wand back out of his pocket where he had stored it for safe keeping before.

He needn't have bothered. The room lit itself around them after his brother's terse command and he looked around it carefully as he tried to readjust his eyes. They had landed on what was likely Colin's mattress in a fairly nondescript room. There was only one armchair aside from the mattress and the rest of the room was empty. He saw a toilet and a shower in one corner of the room, sans curtain. Other than that, there were no doors, bookcases or anything else around them other than smooth walls and the wall of holes that they had come from.

Dennis whirled around and tried to remember which hole they had come from. He was fairly positive he knew which one it was, but he wasn't completely sure.

"Col'? How do we get out of here?" He asked, getting off the mattress that his brother was still laid out upon.

"We?" Colin turned and looked at him with a haunted look in his eyes. "We don't. We are staying here. We're safe here. I promise that I'll show you that there's nothing out there that you need."

Chapter 15 – Side Concerns

The sludge was growing; pushing its way down into the cracks between the stones themselves and traveling out in all directions away from the room of its birth.

Too bad no one had the time or energy to care.

. . .

The week passed very slowly for the denizens of Hogwarts. On one hand, the Daily Prophet did retract its story about Harry becoming the next dark lord, but as Rita Skeeter had predicted, the readers had already made up their minds about him, so nothing changed. If anything, his treatment by his classmates (other than the Slytherins and a handful of others) merely got worse; the students led by the very persuasive Ron Weasley in thinking that he had somehow threatened the paper to get his way.

"Just like a Potter not to take the blame for something," Harry had heard his former mate saying on more than one occasion.

"Ignore him," Draco said one of those times.

"I am," Harry said with a practiced shrug of indifference.

He caught the look that passed between Draco and Blaise but didn't say anything about it. They could worry about him all they liked, but it didn't do away with the problems that he faced every time he stepped out into the corridors.

The physical attacks had largely stopped, but the vitriol laced rumors and whispers behind his back had not; nor had the reactions from the students of the other houses whenever they saw him coming down the hall. The younger students had taken to scuttling away from him quickly, while the older ones looked on with disdain and anger.

He hated it.

. . .

Dennis huddled in one corner of the room—their prison—quietly watching his brother pace back and forth, muttering to himself. Every so often he caught a word or two of what Colin was saying, but it rarely made any sense.

"He said, he said," Colin muttered unintelligibly under his breath as he stalked past Dennis once more. "Said he'd—," Dennis couldn't hear what he said, but he couldn't help but flinching when his brother suddenly broke into hysterical giggles.

"No, we can't—can't go . . . any idea where . . . safe, have to make him understand."

Abruptly Colin stopped his pacing and turned straight towards where Dennis was still curled up. A frightening smile appeared on his older brother's face and Dennis tried to keep his tears from showing in his eyes. He didn't like being afraid of his sibling, of the boy he considered his closest friend, his confidante.

"Dennis," Colin whispered.

"Col'?" Dennis whispered back, hating how squeaky his voice was then.

Colin walked towards him quickly and he unsuccessfully tried to keep from shaking. His brother didn't seem to notice either way though, and Dennis wasn't sure whether it was a good thing or not. On one hand, he didn't want to show him fear, but then again, if his brother didn't notice his fear, then didn't that mean that Colin was capable of doing anything to him?

His brother grabbed his arm and roughly pulled him across the room, dumping him roughly on the bare mattress that was still sitting next the giant wall of hive like exits. Colin had explained to him that only a few would actually get him anywhere; the rest of were simply traps to ensnare their enemies.

"Knowledge is power, yeah little brother?" Colin asked shortly after releasing him.

Dennis nodded timidly.

"Do you know what sodomy is?"

Dennis felt something flinch inside his stomach. He hadn't been expecting such a straightforward question, and certainly not something of that caliber. Not entirely trusting himself to speak, he nodded his response.

"Well what is it?" Colin nearly growled, his eyes flashing in the low light that he kept the room lit with at all times.

"It's—It's when someone g-gets buggered in, in the arse," Dennis whispered hesitantly, his eyes wide as they watched his brother carefully.

"Right in one!" Colin leant to ruffle his hair, but Dennis scurried backwards away from his hand. Colin didn't seem to notice. "You're a smart kid, Den'," his brother said fondly, plopping down on the mattress too, less than an arm's length away.

Dennis shivered again as he took in his brother's crazed eyes and messy hair. He'd give anything for someone to find them right then—even Snape!

"Anyone can get sodomized," Colin continued, still unaware of how frightened he was making his brother. "Even boys," his brother said, dropping his voice into a scratchy whisper.

A crazy impulse overtook Dennis's careful control of himself and he blurted out a question that he was immediately horrified at asking.

"Is that what happened to you, Col'?"

His brother stared back at him, a strange malevolent light appearing in his eyes briefly before disappearing.

"Was I sodomized?" His brother looked past Dennis with a thoughtful expression on his face. "Yes."

Dennis choked and shoved his fist in his mouth to keep his sobs from making sound. Steeling himself for what might happen next, he bravely scooted closer to his brother.

"What happened?" He whispered.

Colin looked up and then without any warning, he tackled Dennis, throwing him on his back roughly.

"Oof!" Dennis huffed as all the air was forcefully pushed out of his lungs. Colin was now sitting on his chest and Dennis could feel his terror begin mounting again.

"He took off my clothes with a spell," Colin whispered, leaning over to speak directly in Dennis's ear. "And then he stuck his finger up my arse. Have you ever put your finger in anyone's arse?"

Dennis shook his head in the negative, far beyond terrified.

No one to help me! No one to help me! A panicked voice kept shouting in his mind.

Colin looked dispassionately at him from atop his chest, idly stroking the side of Dennis's face with the back of his fingers.

"Was it Ron? Did Ron d-do that t-t-to you?" Dennis gasped out suddenly. He felt positive that the lack of oxygen was getting to his brain.

"He raped me, Den'," Colin said, leaning back over him with a sad look.

"No, no!" Dennis cried out, his eyes blurring with tears. Please let it not be true. Not my brother. Please, he begged silently.

Colin looked at him thoughtfully and then silently took off shirt, revealing his slight build to his younger brother.

"Wh—What are you doing, Colin?" Dennis asked in a choked voice.

"There's only one way that I can keep you safe, Dennis," Colin said sadly, bringing his hands down to rest on Dennis's much thinner chest.

No. No. NO!

For once, Dennis's mind and body were the same as his magic reacted for him, flinging Colin across the room with a resounding THUMP as his brother hit the wall. Both boys scrambled to their feet,

but Dennis was a hair faster. For a moment, the brothers merely stared at each other, and then suddenly their paralysis broke. Dennis turned around and jumped onto the wall of open-ended pipes, climbing up as fast as he could as Colin ran across the room towards him.

Fear was beating loud in Dennis's ears as he pulled himself up haphazardly, and he could hear Colin only a few rows below him.

"I can save you Dennis! I only want to keep you safe!" His brother growled after him, swiping a hand at him and only narrowly missing.

Dennis shrieked and pulled his foot out of the way, pushing his way inside a dark tube in the process. It was too late to get back out; Colin would have him in a heartbeat if he tried that. Shaking his head, his hands and arms trembling, he crawled down the tube as fast as he could. It was a bit like being on a playground set—but at night, and while being chased by a monster. Sweat was making his hands slippery and he could hear Colin scuttling far too closely behind him.

"Go away!" He screamed out, not stopping in his harried escape.

"I can keep you from getting hurt! You won't have to worry about your virginity ever again!" Were his brother's insane words that floated up to him in their dark tunnel.

"No!" He squeaked, blindly propelling his body forwards into the seemingly unending tunnel. I want Harry Potter. I want to find Harry. Please, I want to find Harry, he was begging silently, his breath coming in sharp hitches as his panicking system tried to keep him going.

He threw himself forwards one last time, just as the slick ground of the tunnel began angling downwards in a steep descent. He couldn't stop himself from sliding, all he could do was to grab his wand and make sure it didn't break as he fell down into a deep hole of apparent nothingness.

. . .

"Harry!"

Harry instinctively reinforced the shields around himself and the other fifth year Slytherins before turning to see who was calling his name. He blinked in surprise at seeing the Weasley twins breaking their way through the slow moving mass of students in the hallway.

"Could be a trap," Draco whispered in his ear.

"Don't take anything from them," Blaise whispered in his other ear.

"Just watch their hands," Harry muttered, his eyes permanently fixed on the faces of the red haired duo coming up to them. Draco and Blaise nodded from where they were flanking him, and he could instinctively feel the others behind him move in closer.

"Harry," the twins greeted him in unison, raising their empty hands up around their heads.

"We're not going—," started Fred. "—to hurt you," George finished. They both wore identical serious expressions, but Harry didn't dare relax his guard around them.

"Forgive me if I don't believe you," he said, doing a very passable imitation of Severus's sneer.

"Ron is an arse," George said—well, now that Harry was looking at him, he wasn't entirely sure that it was George speaking at all. Maybe it really was Fred.

"He made Ginny cry," Fred—or maybe it was George—added; a touch of fire coming to his eyes as the injustice.

"Ginny?" Harry asked, his eyes widening ever so slightly. He knew a lot of people thought they had been together—or should have been together—but his concern was only that of a worried older brother. Ginny was one of the only people who had continued treating him like a human being after Ron had kicked him out of Gryffindor. She still smiled at him in the hallways now, even though he was in Slytherin.

"How do we know you're telling the truth?" Blaise interjected coolly, breaking Harry out of his thoughts.

"You don't," Fred said. "But we can prove it," George added with as much sincerity that Harry had ever heard from him.

"How?" Harry challenged.

"Dose us," they said in unison.

Harry's eyebrows went up.

"You mean?" He prompted, not believing what they were suggesting.

"Veritaserum. We'll take it," the twins looked at them levelly, not a trace of humor evident in either freckled face.

. . .

Several hours later found Draco, Blaise and Harry in Severus's classroom. Moments later, Severus swirled in as well, a dark look on his face that was in sharp contrast with the concerned look in his eyes.

"I won't do this without a wizard's oath from all of you, swearing never to mention this to anyone." He spoke tersely, his eyes on the clock. It was nearly 9, and the twins were due to turn up then. "I don't need to tell you what could happen to all of us if this got out," he warned.

Each of the three boys nodded seriously, and then as a group, they swore on their magic not to reveal a thing.

Finally it was time and soon after they heard two relatively timid knocks coming from the classroom door.

"Come in," Severus barked.

The twins stuck their heads in and after determining that there were no hidden dangers, they slid into the classroom, closing the door softly behind them. Severus carefully warded the entrance after they were inside, making no effort to hide his motions from either of the red haired boys. He then repeated his demand to them and they immediately acquiesced, swearing their oaths with those same serious faces that were so very unfamiliar to the others present.

"Sit down," Severus said gruffly to the two sixth year Gryffindors and they sat nervously in the chairs that had appeared in front of them. "I'm assuming that neither of you have ever been dosed with veritaserum, correct?"

"No sir," they answered in unison, somehow looking incredibly old and ridiculously young at the same time as they stared up at him with wide eyes.

Severus fought against rubbing his head as he felt an incoming headache begin percolating in his skull. Of all the Weasleys, he had always found the twins the easiest to deal with, especially once he got it into their heads that they were not to experiment or prank while in his classroom. He also knew that he was likely the only professor in all of Hogwarts that felt that way—other than Hagrid, perhaps.

"I have the antidote with me, should it turn out that you are allergic," he warned in a soft voice.

"Yes sir." Again with the unison!

Secretly Severus wondered whether their ability to talk separately was actually the act and not the other way around.

"Under any other circumstance, I would not hesitate to ignore a request of this caliber. However," Severus paused and glared at each of the boys in the room, "given the unusualness of the situation at hand, I have allowed myself to be persuaded otherwise. This will not be a repeated endeavor on any of our parts, understand?"

He looked on with satisfaction as they all nodded.

"Good," he allowed the corner of his lip to turn upwards slightly. Quickly he revealed the little bottle of clear liquid to the room and indicated to the twins that they were to open their mouths and stick out their tongues.

"How does it taste?" He asked with an upturned eyebrow.

"It doesn't," was Fred's answer, shortly copied by his brother George.

"That's the idea," Severus said with a cold look. Draco and Blaise each smirked in reaction, but Harry's face very much emulated his

own. Severus made a mental note to talk to the boy after this was over.

After waiting a suitable amount of time, he looked back at the red heads eyes and noticed with some satisfaction that they had glazed over a slight amount.

"We'll start easily. What is your first name?" He asked, turning towards Fred.

"Fred," was the boy's monotone response.

"What is your first name?" He asked, turning his attention to George.

"George."

Severus asked a few other questions of similar importance and then moved onto the more pertinent ones.

"Did Ronald Weasley threaten either of you in any way this past month?"

"Yes," they answered as one.

Severus barely avoided rolling his eyes.

"What did he threaten to do to you?"

"Blackmail," was the succinct response he got. Severus raised an eyebrow and looked up towards his Slytherins with a look as though to say, See? Not only Slytherins do such things.

"Who would he tell what?"

"Our parents," Fred answered by himself. "He threatened to tell them that we've been experimenting on the other Gryffindors with our joke store products," George elaborated.

"Just the other Gryffindors?" Draco interjected, earning himself a glare from Severus.

"Until this year, we experimented on everyone, but in the past month, we've only been using the Gryffindors."

"Why?" Severus asked, sending a look of warning back towards his godson.

"Because they've lost their minds," Fred answered first.

"Because they're trying to hurt our Harry," George answered, a slight defensive edge coming through in his voice.

"Our Harry?" Severus mouthed towards his newest snake. A pink faced Harry shrugged and shook his head.

"Why do you call him 'your' Harry?"

"Because he's family," the answer was in unison again.

Severus knew they were getting short on time, so he abandoned that route—no matter how interesting it had been—and turned to the other most pressing topic.

"What did Ronald say to make your sister cry?"

George was silent. It was apparently Fred's turn to reveal something important.

"He mentioned Percy to her," was Fred's ambiguous answer.

"And why did that make Ms. Weasley cry?" Severus asked, curious.

Silence.

Severus decided that a different kind of question was needed to get an answer.

"Why do you think the mention of Percy made Ms. Weasley cry?"

A pause, and then an odd answer came to the fore.

"He pays too much attention to her sometimes, I think," Fred said, finally independent of his brother.

Draco's face was one of confusion, and Blaise's hinted of suspicion, but only his and Harry's were completely devoid of emotion. Severus

caught his newest snake's eye briefly and gave him a nod. Yes, they would be discussing this at length later.

Shortly thereafter, the veritaserum wore off. Before leaving, they stopped at the doorway once more and asked if they had proven themselves to be trustworthy yet.

"Trustworthy? Yes. Trusted?" He raised an eyebrow with a questioning look. "I'll let Mr. Evans make that decision."

Then Severus sent the boys on their way, providing them with a note on the off chance that they encountered anyone in the hallway.

. . .

Severus instructed Draco and Blaise to go back to the dorms shortly after the departure of the twins, and then turned back towards Harry with a hand up to forestall the inevitable discussion.

"Once we're back in our quarters, but no sooner," the man told him calmly, putting his hand down on the Harry's shoulder and guiding him out of the classroom.

Harry nodded and kept his mouth shut. The man had referred to it as their quarters, and he wondered if it hadn't just been an accident. Except that Severus doesn't have accidents, was his chastising thought.

Our quarters, he mused on the idea all of the way back there, finally coming out of his thoughts as he left the room to change into his pajamas. He didn't care what he put on, but grabbed at a pair of sleep pants and a t-shirt at random, and quickly was back out in the main living area. He wasn't surprised to discover Severus already waiting for him, his own robe off, and shirt sleeves unbuttoned and rolled up to his elbows.

"I could have sworn that you owned pajamas," Harry said with a cheeky grin.

"I could have sworn that you owned sense," the man replied flippantly, a teasing look on his typically serious face.

"Good thing we weren't swearing on anything important," Harry added with a laugh.

"Yes, a good thing," his head of house said, the amused look fading from his eyes as Harry took a seat in the armchair next to him.

Silence between them that was broken by a hesitantly voiced question on his part.

"Do, do you think that Fred meant what it sounded like? I mean," Harry looked at his suddenly very interesting hands, "Do you think that Fred could have meant to make it sound like Percy might have something like an unhealthy interest in Ginny?"

"What do you think?"

Severus is letting me think this through on my own first.

"Well," Harry finally looked back up, "he couldn't have lied, right? Being under veritaserum, right? He couldn't have lied," he whispered, trying to make his brain see the truth. "But he didn't know for sure either, did he. Otherwise he would have said so, one way or the other."

"Veritaserum is often used in situations where the truth isn't clear. Sometimes it is used simply because it allows the brain to make connections that haven't been made before," Severus was looking at him intently, almost as though he were analyzing Harry from the outside in.

"But, they're the Weasleys," Harry hated how his voice sounded like he was pleading with Severus for it not to be true.

"And?"

"They're like the best family ever created," he argued, his voice squeaking with emotion.

Severus stared at him with surprise.

"What makes you say that?" He finally said after a moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Well, you can tell that Mrs. and Mr. Weasley really care for their kids. They do things together all the time and—and they watch out for one another," Harry trailed off miserably. What did he know about happy families? Even if he hadn't been part of the insanity that was the Dursleys, his cousin's family would still have been messed up. He was just a convenient scapegoat.

"Tell me Harry," Severus's voice was as gentle as it ever got and he looked up with some trepidation at the man's change in tone. "Did your cousin ever know about what your uncle did to you?"

It was an honest question and a pertinent one for their discussion. That didn't mean that it was any easier to answer.

"S-Sometimes I thought he knew, but he's really not that good of a liar, so no, I don't think so," Harry answered in a voice that was just barely above a whisper.

Severus's eyes were sad as they looked at him and Harry was forced to look away.

"People see what they want. It's true for society and it's true for families," Severus said softly.

"But the Weasleys," he argued half-heartedly, glancing back up to look into Severus's sad eyes once again.

"Are human, just like the rest of us," Severus confirmed with a nod.

Harry thought about the implications of that and frowned.

"Then I don't think I want to be human."

"It's not that simple," Severus sounded infinitely calm and it annoyed him.

"The Weasley family was everything I ever wanted!" He yelled, standing up with a Snape-esque flourish and striding angrily to the other side of the room. "Mr. and Mrs. Weasley really do love their kids," he gasped out around his rising emotions. "Why can't—," he cut himself off, suddenly furious at himself for trying to voice his longest standing wish.

"Why can't what?" Severus was abruptly crouched beside him, and he realized with a start that he was now curled up on the floor just next to the wall.

"Why can't anyone ever love me?" He sobbed out, pulling his arms around his knees tightly. "Like anyone alive? What is it about me that makes people hate me? What did I do?" He was crying, really crying. It seemed that it was all he ever did anymore.

"Not everyone hates you," Severus's dark eyes stared back at him from where the man was seated in front of him.

"I don't want to just not be hated," he said around his tears. "I want to be loved, damn it. I want someone to give a damn about me," he hit his chest forcefully, maybe even hard enough to bruise. "I want there to be a—a f-fucking constant in my life; someone who always cares about me, someone who bloody well wants the best for me! Fuck!" He put his arms over his head and sobbed. "And fucking R-Ron," he stuttered, determined to get this out even if it killed him. "Fucking Ron has all of that! And he's bloody jealous of me! The fucking-boy-who-lived!" He wiped at his face furiously with his sleeve, and felt Severus shove a handkerchief into his hand.

"And he's jealous of me. He has everything and I have nothing and I hate it," he said a few moments later, the violent burst of emotion suddenly disappearing and leaving him with an empty feeling of despair in his chest.

He dared to look back at Severus and was nearly bowled over by the sadness he saw in the man's face.

"Guess there's no real point in loving me, right?" He tried to smile and give another shrug, but the tears were threatening to return, so his smile turned into more of a grimace. "I mean, why love someone that's just gonna get murdered by the dark lord, yeah? Better to put that energy into something that'll last a little longer," he spat bitterly, no longer trying to hide his misery. He stood up and Severus stood up silently beside him.

"Don't you have anything to say?" He directed his glare at the older man still beside him. "Something like life sucks and it's better that I learn that now? Yeah?" He growled and dared poke a finger into Severus's lean torso.

"Well I don't bloody care. I don't," he tried to say defiantly; turning his back on his professor and slowly making his way back towards his room.

"Harry," the word was spoken before he had made it out very far.

"What?" He answered irritably, hoping that Severus couldn't see his tears falling from where he was standing behind him.

A hand on his shoulder pulling him around, pulling him around to bury his face in the warm chest that belonged to the man who hadn't given up on him yet.

"Silly boy," the words were spoken into his hair with a certain level of fondness that he wasn't yet entirely used to hearing coming from anyone—let alone this man.

"Everyone should hate me," Harry sobbed into the body that was holding him up. "I'm horrible, I'm stupid, I'm—."

"Hush," the word was a command, even if it was spoken in a gentle whisper.

The man holding him didn't offer him any empty platitudes or promises to make things better. He just held onto him and allowed him to do the same.

And for a while, Harry truly felt that he was at peace.

A/N - Reviews make me really ridiculously happy!

Chapter 16 – Discoveries

"Ms. Weasley," Severus said to the girl who had just entered his office.

"Sir," the red haired fourth year answered timidly, not at all sure of why she was there in the first place.

Severus briefly looked her with a critical eye and wondered why she had not been questioned before then. The signs were very obvious to anyone who was looking. The child's hair was unkempt and there were pronounced bags under her eyes that were almost certainly due to nightmares. Furthermore, the girl's personality had changed; her demeanor far more shy and timid than it had ever been, even earlier in the school year.

"Take a seat Ms. Weasley," Severus indicated with an idle wave of his hand, looking back at the work he was grading. No reason to let the girl know he was onto her, at least not yet.

He waited until he heard her shifting nervously before looking back up at her from the pile of scrolls that seemed to permanently adorn the top of his desk.

"I've called you in here to discuss a matter of great importance with you, Ms. Weasley," he said, taking note of her slightly widened eyes.

"Sir?" She asked in little more than a squeak.

"Your brother, Ms. Weasley," he informed her in a solemn voice, his eyes staring intently into her own frightened ones.

He can't possibly know about that! The thought blared in her head almost loud enough for him to hear without the use of legilimency.

"Which brother, sir?" She asked demurely, her calm façade betrayed by the twitchiness of her hands in her lap.

He fought against showing her any emotions in his face. He had asked the question in an ambiguous way in hopes that her mind would let him know whether he was on the right path.

"Percy," he specified, seeing her cheeks pink with the one word. It was little wonder that Ronald had chosen that topic as the one with which to torture her to silence.

"What about him, sir?" She asked after taking a fortifying breath.

"It has come to my attention that some of his behaviors, his actions regarding the female students here at Hogwarts were not among the most honorable during his schooldays here."

That was hogwash. Whatever nefarious acts Percy Weasley had been involved with during his schooldays had been limited to his home turf, so far as Severus could tell.

"Female students?" The girl's voice had dropped into a whisper, her eyes almost impossibly wide. Another less aware professor might have taken the girl's reaction simply as one of shock, but he knew better.

"Yes, Ms. Weasley," he stated calmly, turning the intensity of his glare down a notch in what he hoped came across as a commiserating look. "Female students. Have you heard anything about this before now?"

She was licking her lips nervously, her eyes darting back forth from his face to his desk and back again.

"What sorts of n-nefarious acts?"

"From what I have surmised, he seems to have had an unusual amount of interest in the younger girls," he said pointedly, looking on calmly as the spots of pink in the girl's cheeks briefly flared a brighter red.

He didn't enjoy frightening the child, but given the delicate nature of the topic, he couldn't just very well ask her whether or not her brother had been molesting her. He hoped that with the addition of potential other innocents into the equation, she might be prompted to say something more about her own experience.

"Was it other girls in Gryffindor?"

"Quite possibly yes, Ms. Weasley," was his grave response. He wasn't lying really since she herself was a girl in Gryffindor.

Their conversation went back to silence, and it was then that Severus decided to make his play.

"If there's anything you know about this situation, your input would be greatly appreciated Ms. Weasley," he looked at her intently, but she made no further sounds. He had a feeling that she would need to go and think on his proposal first.

So it was with a properly placed sigh that he finally dismissed her to go on her way. She wasted little time in vacating his office, leaving him alone at his desk with only his dark thoughts.

. . .

After determining that Hermione had likely been attacked by one of her fellow Gryffindors, it had been decided that she would be safer staying in the infirmary until the guilty party was found. Madam Pomfrey had given her a set of quarters located at the back of the infirmary. This allowed her some privacy, aside from the ever watchful eyes of the aptly named "Dragon Lady" matron.

Hermione appreciated the solitude of having her own room, especially after being told about Pomfrey's findings in her medical scans. At first she had been flabbergasted, and she had tried to argue with the healer, denying completely that such a thing as rape could be true—especially in regards to her own self. It had taken her quite a while to come to grips with the idea, but finally she had accepted the truth of the evidence.

It was then that she had truly understood the necessity of the solitude her private room afforded her. How was it that she had been betrayed so horribly? Why hadn't anyone said anything? How many times had she been obliviated really? How many times had it happened?

The subject of rape had always made her uncomfortable, but now that it was so very personal, she found it impossible to give voice to the word at all. If anything, she referred to it as being attacked, but if given the choice, she usually opted to say nothing at all about it.

After all, her contact with the outside world had largely been cut off. Who could she talk to, really?

Madam Pomfrey had set up appointments for her with a mind healer, but they hadn't made it very far in their sessions yet. Everything was still too raw, too emotional for her to talk about. And of course, what made it worse was that she didn't know what had happened. And as much as she deplored being left in the dark about something, she had to admit—at least to herself—that perhaps not knowing was the best course of action. Perhaps. Maybe. She didn't know. She wondered if she would ever know anything ever again.

The mind healer—her counselor—was an older woman by the name of Madam Moss, who had been trained enough in legilimency to allow her to see some of those memories that Hermione had lost. Strangely enough, none of those memories had yet revealed her attacker's face.

"He's there Hermione, but your mind isn't yet ready to see him," Moss informed her at her latest session. Thankfully Madam Moss came to her, and hadn't yet made Hermione leave the safety of her warded infirmary room.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked in a quiet voice, her hands clasped tightly together in her lap.

"At first glance, it seems as though he's always in your peripheral, never in your direct line of sight, but upon further investigation, I've come to realize that it's your mind that is shielding his identity from me. If I were to make an educated guess, I would say that he is someone that you know, perhaps even someone that you trusted a great deal."

Hermione didn't know what to say to that. She had trusted many people a great deal prior to being told the truth by Madam Pomfrey.

"Are you sure that your boyfriend didn't see anything?" Madam Moss prompted in her silence. "Anything out of the ordinary?"

"He would have told me," Hermione said in a younger sounding voice.

"I know that we've discussed this possibility before, but—."

"—He didn't do this," Hermione cut the other woman off with an angry glare. "Ron wouldn't do something like this. He's good!"

"And what of your other friend? Mr. Potter?"

"Harry wouldn't hurt a fly," she insisted stubbornly, hurriedly scrubbing at her eyes with a balled up tissue.

"But you have to admit that he's changed. Isn't that right?" The woman prompted with a patient look.

"Everyone changes," she spat out. She was tired of this conversation, tired of this woman. She might not have understood the changes that the summer had wrought in Harry, but she would never have ever thought him capable of something this heinous. He respected her more than that. He respected all of them more than that.

"I'm tired," she said a touch grumpily. "I'm going to take a nap."

"Very well, Hermione," Madam Moss said with a sigh before standing up slowly. "I'll see you again on Friday."

Hermione nodded, still looking away. It wasn't until she heard the door close that she allowed her tears to come for real.

Sometimes she wondered if they would ever stop.

...

In the afternoons after classes and before he went back to Severus's—also known as their quarters!—Harry's time was usually spent in either the Slytherin common room or the back corner of the library. Madam Pince had shown him a surprising amount of support whenever anyone had tried to harass him there, and as a result, the library had become something of a safe place for him and the other Slytherins to spend their time.

This particular afternoon found him in the Slytherin common room, surrounded by the other Slytherin fifth years. They were camped out in the far corner of the room, against the wall that showed them

murky images of the lake and whatever creatures that happened to choose that time to swim past them.

Out of nowhere, Millicent looked up at Harry and announced rather gruffly that, "It's a good thing you're a boy." This was followed up with a glare and a couple of snickers from the boys on either side of him.

"Um yes," he stammered with a bewildered look. Where on earth had that come from?

"Don't mind Milly, Harry," Pansy said with a glare of her own back at her girlfriend. "She's a bit jealous," Pansy said in a loud stage whisper.

"What happened this time?" Draco asked with a long suffering sigh that told Harry he dealt with this sort of thing more often than he'd like to admit.

"Clarice Fatua was looking and making eyes at Pansy during lunch today," Millicent answered in an affronted voice.

"Clarice?" Harry questioned with some confusion. "Isn't she that tiny third year that always tries to sit next to Blaise in the Great Hall?"

Blaise let out a resounding groan and put his head in his hands.

"That'd be the one," Draco nodded with a smirk at his friend. "She thinks she's going to get lucky, and she doesn't care how."

"She's only thirteen!" Harry hissed back with wide eyes.

"She's just desperate for some attention," Draco answered with a shrug.

"Then she's choosing a bad route to get that attention," Harry said after a moment's thought. "Has anyone tried talking to Severus about her?"

"Oh, he knows," Pansy answered with a casual flip of her hair.

"And he's not doing anything?"

"He gave her a warning," Teddy answered absently, his attention primarily on his notes as he flipped through the back of a textbook.

"And she ignored him?" Harry asked, his eyebrows disappearing behind his bangs.

"Naw man," Blaise corrected him with a shake of his head. "She used to be worse. This is what she's like after he talked with her."

"Seriously?" Harry squeaked.

"Yeah," Blaise answered and Harry could see the others nodding their agreements as well.

Silence fell between them and it was several more minutes before anyone spoke again.

"Does this sort of thing happen often? Someone doing something risky like that?"

"Sometimes," Draco gave another shrug, looking up and piercing him with his slate colored eyes. "As a whole, Slytherins don't get treated the best at home and they tend to act out in darker ways than the other houses."

Harry found himself nodding at that. Now he really wished that he had let the Sorting Hat do its job.

"Stop with the regrets already," Blaise said softly with a light punch to the arm. "This is here. This is now. You've found the right place to be. Who cares if it took you a little while longer than most?"

"Yeah," Harry answered back with a small nod. Blaise was right.

"Come on," Blaise smiled a blinding grin at him and he felt the corners of his mouth turning up in response. "Help me study these ingredients for Potions. We wouldn't want our star student to screw up, now would we?"

Harry's grin got bigger. Who would have ever thought that he'd be Snape's star pupil?

Certainly not him.

. . .

The sludge, the crud that was the failed experiment stinking up the room in the dungeons, didn't like being secluded far away from the student population. It had been created by magical beings, and therefore wanted to be near magical beings.

Thus it pushed itself out through the cracks and the holes of the stones of the room it was housed in; searching out sources of power, light and energy that it could feed on and become rejuvenated by. At first it headed in the direction of the Slytherins, but turned away after detecting the magical signatures of the few students who had served detention hurting it.

Turning away from the Slytherins in their even colder dungeons, it unknowingly began traveling in the direction of the Gryffindor tower.

. . .

Dennis fell for what felt like forever. Little did he know that his path was being forged and guided by the magic of both the Room of Requirement and Hogwarts herself. In a rare show of solidarity, the Room of Requirement had joined its magic with that of the castle and the result was the dark tunnel that Dennis was now hurtling down in. The Room of Requirement had decided—quite forcibly—that if it could not figure out a way to bring Harry Potter to it, then it would take Dennis Creevey to Harry.

. . .

Harry had just said good night to Severus moments before and was now lying in bed trying to drift off to sleep. The twins had approached him earlier that day about a new prank they wanted him to try out on Ron. They had told him it had something to do with exploding spiders and Harry's interest had been hooked. Now it was just a question of making it happen, and hopefully getting the other Slytherins in on it.

He could feel a smile on his face at the thought.

His thoughts were becoming less concrete and he was beginning to nod off when suddenly a loud THUMP from the other side of the room startled him awake.

"Lumos," he whispered, waving his wand at the lamp beside his bed.

Sitting on the other side of his room was a small figure with mousy brown hair and he sucked in a breath at the sight.

"Harry?" The voice was small and hesitant, but he recognized it immediately.

"Dennis?" He asked in amazement. Where on earth had the boy come from?

He watched as the little figure stood up and timidly made his way towards him.

"Is it really you, Harry?" Dennis stepped closer and he could see that the boy's eyes were full of unshed tears. What had happened to the little second year to make him like this?

"Where have you been, Dennis? Everyone's been really worried about you," he answered, patting a spot on the mattress beside him for the little boy to take a seat.

Dennis's lower lip trembled and suddenly the tears began to fall for real. Following his instincts, he reached out and pulled the boy into his lap and wrapped his arms around him tightly.

"Harry," the second year clutched at his pajama shirt and cried great big walloping sobs out onto his shoulder. "It's been so bad. I've been so scared," he managed to get out between his violent outpouring of emotion.

"Well, you're safe now. I've got you," Harry soothed, rubbing the tiny boy's back. He wondered if Severus could hear them. Dennis's tears weren't slacking off. The boy actually seemed to be getting more upset the longer he sobbed. He didn't know what the kid had been through, but he could tell that some of what was making the boy so upset now was relief.

Feeling very out of his depth and worried that Dennis was going to make himself sick with heartbreaking cries he was still letting out, Harry gathered the boy up in his arms and stood up.

"I'm going to get you some help, Dennis," he whispered, sounding more in control than he felt as he carefully made his way out to the main room of their quarters. Severus's room was directly next to his, so it was only a few more steps to the right and he was lightly knocking on his professor's door. In the back of his mind, he wondered what time it was, and he hoped that he wasn't waking the man up.

"Harry?" Severus asked, opening the door and looking somewhat shocked to see a crying boy in his arms.

His professor was dressed in midnight blue pajamas, his feet covered in thick woolen socks, but since his hair wasn't mussed and his eyes were still focused, Harry figured that the man hadn't yet gone to sleep. It was a good thing, especially since it seemed that theirs was an evening still in the making.

"I think I need some help with this," Harry said, shooting Severus a worried glance.

"Put him on the couch. I'll be there in a minute," Severus replied in a deep voice, taking control of the situation as Harry had hoped he would. The man closed his door and Harry carried the nearly hyperventilating boy over to the couch.

Moments later, Severus joined them wearing a black dressing gown and carrying a vial of calming draught.

"Dennis, open your mouth," Harry prompted and the boy did so obediently, his breath uneven and his cheeks wet and splotchy.

Harry watched Severus administer the draught quickly and efficiently and then sat back and waited on the potion to kick in. To his great relief—and comfort—Severus sat down on his other side and put an arm around his shoulders, the same way his arm was currently around the Gryffindor second year.

"Thank you sir," Harry murmured quietly against the man's chest. Even with the excitement of finding Dennis in his quarters, he was

still tired. It had, after all, been a long and trying day, and he was sleepy.

The sounds in the room dropped down to faint sniffles and the crackling of the fire as the calming draught finally kicked in. Harry was almost asleep when he felt the faint telltale signs of laughter coming from the man he was currently propped up against.

"You two are certainly a sight," Severus said softly in his ear. "Do you mind if he sleeps with you tonight? I have a feeling that he will be most comfortable there."

"Sure," Harry breathed and leaned farther into the soft heat that Severus's chest provided him. He felt the weight of Dennis shift as the boy reacted to the change in angle, but he wasn't coherent enough to realize why.

Distantly he felt Severus's arms come around him and the weight in his lap more firmly, and then he felt those same arms flex as they lifted him and Dennis up into the air. He blinked and suddenly he was in his bed with a smaller warm body pressed tightly up next to him. He felt Severus's hand ruffle his hair. If he been more awake, he likely would have flushed in embarrassment at the act—regardless of how much he liked it.

He could feel his professor's hands pulling up the blankets around he and his small friend and he smiled a bit in the darkness. He wasn't afraid of Severus's hands the way he was around his Uncle's or Sirius's. He didn't have to be on his guard around him, because Severus just wanted him to be a student—just a teen. He didn't want him for more nefarious acts. He didn't want him for a scapegoat. He just wanted him to be safe.

It made perfect sense to him as he fell asleep, but it likely wouldn't be as easy for him to accept come morning. However, he would appreciate the peace that the realization brought as long as he could.

"Safe, Dennis. We're safe," he muttered to the boy huddled next to him. "Severus—," here he yawned, "Severus won't let anyone hurt us here. Safe," he whispered, finally finding his way into sleep.

. . .

Severus watched somberly as his snake and the tiny lion fell asleep. Questioning Dennis on his whereabouts over the past few weeks would have to wait. The child had been far too emotionally distraught to even consider speaking with him, let alone speaking on such sensitive subjects as why he and his brother had disappeared. Of course, that was assuming that the two had even been together, something that still had not been proven. After all, why would the younger of the two find his way back to them now, but without the other boy as well?

The questions were numerous and the answers were few. He sighed and shook his head at the all too familiar situation. Before going back to his own bed, Severus activated several of the wards that had long been in place around the bed the two boys were nestled in; the most important of which being the one that would alert him to when the boys awoke.

He touched Harry's head once more before leaving the room, and smiled a bit when the child relaxed a bit more under his fingertips.

"Sleep well," he whispered and then waved his wand at the lit lamp to turn it down to almost nothing.

. . .

About the point that Dennis was finding himself in Snape's quarters, Colin found himself being thrown out of a tube, back into the living area that he had created for himself. Upon seeing that he was still alone, the emotionally distressed boy began screaming and beating his fists against the ground hard enough to bloody them.

"Get rid of it all!" He howled at the magical room. "I want it gone now!" He screamed, jumping to his feet and beating his bloody hands against his thin chest.

The creation that he had painstakingly built over the past week shimmered and then disappeared for good, leaving him alone in a large empty room. His wand still in his back pocket, the shirtless wild eyed boy screamed out one final request.

"Give me the door!"

A door appeared on the wall next to him and he leapt towards it, barely aware of the pain from his hands as he made his way through to the outside world.

Where's Dennis? His muddled brain kept going over his brother's disappearance. He couldn't understand how he had lost the younger boy.

"I have to keep him safe!" He shouted out to the hallway, his breath catching with a sob. He stumbled down the hallway and made it to the stairs, taking them two at a time as he rushed to make it down quickly.

He couldn't see, his tears were blinding his sight, his fear for Ron forgotten in lieu of the terrifying idea that he had lost his brother. He barely noticed it when he began to fall.

. . .

"Wake ups, young Master student sir!" Blim, one of the Hogwarts elves said desperately after finding the boy sprawled at the bottom of the massive staircase. The boy was only partially dressed and there was blood on his hands and head, along with a massive goose egg that was rising at the top of the child's hairline.

A younger elf and certainly not one of the smarter ones, Blim did what he always did when faced with a problem. He took it home to his father.

Blim was waiting by his bedside when the boy finally opened his eyes, several hours later.

"How is you feeling?" The young energetic elf asked, peering into Colin's confused face.

"Bad," the boy croaked out, closing his eyes against the nauseating rush of colors and light.

"Where is you supposed to be at?" Blim's father asked from the doorway. He was an elderly elf by the name of Cratch. Blim was the last of his children, and he was thankful that he had ended with Blim and not the other way around. If he had, he likely would have never had another little elf, as much as he loved the little blighters.

A confused look came over the boy's face and he cracked his eyes open again, although it was clear to the two elves that the act was causing the child a great deal of pain.

"I don't know," the boy said in a bewildered voice.

"Whats you name?" Blim asked curiously. "I be Blim. This be my father, Cratch," he stated proudly, nodding his head swiftly while staring openly at the boy with his large bulbous eyes.

"I—I don't know that either," Colin answered with a frightened look at the two house elves in front of him.

"Well, best you sleep now," Cratch said, grabbing his overzealous son by the elbow and dragging him away from the injured boy.

He looked back at the boy and noted with displeasure that the child was still awake. So it was without much more thought that he snapped his fingers and caused Colin to fall into a magically induced sleep. Then he left, taking Blim with him.

Just because they had a visitor in their home didn't mean that they could afford to shirk their other duties. For one thing, they still needed to clean the blood off of the steps that the boy had fallen on.

After all, it was up to them to keep Hogwarts looking her best.

Chapter 17 – Colin Who?

Hermione woke up with a start from a dream that she couldn't quite remember. It was beginning to become a familiar feeling, one that she wasn't at all comfortable with, but also one that she wasn't quite ready to give up on yet.

The idea that her brain knew what happened to her and yet still would not give her access to that knowledge was galling, yet also oddly relieving at the same time. She had always trusted in her brain, even when she was shunned because of it, and she hoped that her faith in her intelligence would reward her once more.

A sound outside her room made her jerk and draw her legs up under her body, her fingers tightening around her wand in reaction. It was the middle of the night—what in Merlin's name could be happening now?

Was that Madam Pomfrey's voice?

Hermione took a deep breath and got out of bed. She was a Gryffindor, was she not? Besides, as long as she was in the infirmary, she was safe, right?

Right, she thought resolutely.

She made her way to the door and opened it slowly, peering cautiously into the corridor outside. The sounds coming from the main room were more distinct now. Something popped and she turned her head towards the noise. She wasn't sure, but those pops certainly had sounded like the pops of displaced air that accompanied the apparition of house elves.

Soft light was spilling out into the hallway and she moved slowly towards it, not wanting to give herself away. Oh, what she would give for an invisibility cloak like Harry's!

"Severus, I'm sorry to be waking you, but I need your help," Hermione heard Poppy's voice and she risked a quick glance around the edge of the doorway. Standing on the other end of the infirmary was the aforementioned healer, her back to the room as she spoke into the green flames of the floo.

"Is it a student?" The potions master's voice came from the fireplace. Hermione was surprised that the normally sarcastic man currently sounded anything but.

He didn't even complain about the time!

"Yes," was Poppy's terse reply. "And given the sensitivity of the situation, I feel that it may be best not to mention his or her name through the floo."

Sensitivity of the situation? I know she's not talking about me. There's nothing new about me that would require his presence tonight.

What other students were in trouble? I hope nothing has happened to Harry! She really needed to talk to him, if only to make sure that he was okay.

Had she really done all she could over the past summer for her once best friend? A feeling of guilt filled her as she slunk silently back to her room. As much as she wanted to know what was going on, she wasn't entirely sure that she could keep from getting found out, especially if Snape was going to be in the room too.

Once back in the safety of her private room, she got in bed and pulled the covers up tight around her shoulders. Ever since the truth had come out about her memory losses, she had been unsure about whom she could trust, causing her to really look hard at many of her relationships with other people. It had finally occurred to her that maybe Harry hadn't been the one to change so drastically that past summer; that maybe the change had been entirely from her end.

In addition, she had found herself wondering whether or not her relationship with Ron had been as good as she had thought it was at the time. She would have asked Ron about it, but as of yet, he had not even bothered to try and visit her. Madam Pomfrey knew better than to keep him from her, especially given the number of times that she had asked about whether the fiery spirited matron had seen him.

In fact, not very many people had bothered to visit her in the infirmary. This was partially because Pomfrey had been actively screening all of her visitors, but she suspected that there were other reasons behind her relative solitude as well. Could it be that people

were angry with her for putting blame on someone within the Gryffindor house?

Could Ron be angry with her? Maybe she should have talked over her concerns with him first.

She put her head down on her knees and wrapped her arms tightly around her legs. A voice inside her mind was insistently trying to point out that she had tried to talk to him before, but nothing had ever come from it.

Hadn't she tried telling him "no" before when he had originally begun pestering her about sex? Her mind was so hazy! She couldn't be sure, not really, not definitely.

But that one distant part of her consciousness still continued to bother her. She hadn't been entirely happy in her relationship with him. Truthfully, he had scared her at times, and she really hadn't enjoyed being hurt as much as she had every time they had gotten together.

Did that mean that he could have been the one to really hurt her?

She shook her head and rubbed her palms against her burning eyes. She couldn't believe it. She couldn't. She might as well believe that the sky was yellow and that Snape was going to adopt Harry someday.

And that would just be pure unadulterated insanity.

Really.

. . .

The day after Dennis Creevey had appeared in his quarters had been frustratingly unproductive for Severus Snape. He had enlisted Harry's help in trying to talk to Dennis, but their efforts had largely been futile. Simply put, the boy was still too distraught to talk to him, even with Harry's comforting presence directly beside him. It was clear that the lad was still worried—if not altogether terrified about the state of his brother. Severus couldn't help but hope that the fourth year Gryffindor was found soon.

After giving strict instructions to Harry and Dennis not to leave his quarters, he had then made his way up to Dumbledore's office to inform him of the surprise appearance of the younger Creevey boy. He was thankful that it was the beginning of the weekend, and that there weren't too many in the hallways as he walked. It had given him some private time to think over the increasingly complex relationship that was developing between him and Harry.

Initially, it had surprised him to discover just how well they had got on with each other, considering their rather troubled and turbulent past. Harry was more than just his father's son. He wished that the events over the past summer hadn't had to happen for him to see the truth about the boy. It would have been so much easier for the child if he had just opened his damn eyes, but as he had said to Harry, hindsight was 20/20.

The child clearly needed a protector in his life, and Severus couldn't but help wonder if he could help him by being the one to fill that role. No one else in the boy's life seemed to be up to taking on the responsibility. He supposed that at one point, the Weasley's might have been an option, but with the present level of animosity between the youngest boy and Harry, that no longer was a viable idea.

These were his thoughts as he rode the stairwell up into Dumbledore's office. Once at the top, he schooled his features and waited for the man to invite him in. There was little point in knocking, and he was loath to do anything just to fulfill the expectations that came with obeying the niceties of the social rules.

"Come in my dear boy!" He heard shortly after, just as he had expected. He didn't give into his urge to roll his eyes, but quickly made his way into the infuriating man's office.

"Have a seat," Dumbledore said with a wave towards the available chairs. His instruction was not a suggestion, and Severus did not treat it as such. He picked a chair and then sank into it carefully. As a student, he had gotten used to scanning every chair and every meal for possible pranks, and although he knew better than to do that around Dumbledore, the urge was still there.

"To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?" The man asked him, smiling as though finding Severus on his doorstep on a Saturday

morning really was pleasant. Oh to be a fly on his wall one day, and see what actually happened behind this man's closed doors.

"Dennis Creevey appeared in my quarters last night," he answered smoothly, waving a hand of annoyance at Albus as the man tried to offer him one of those damnable lemon drops. Someday he would take one just to shock the old man, but he still wouldn't eat it. He'd ferret it out of the office and take it into his lab to analyze.

"Excellent!" Albus replied enthusiastically, clapping his hands together in an open display of relief. "Where did he come from?"

"I haven't been able to determine that as of yet. The boy has been most distraught since finding his way to us."

At his words, something shifted in the Headmaster's still twinkling eyes, and he tried to brace himself for whatever inanity was likely to come out of the man's mouth next.

"How exactly did he manage to make his way to your quarters of all places?"

It was a bit odd, Severus knew, especially since very few knew of the location of his quarters, and of those, the only students that did were Slytherins. He had spoken to Harry that morning about it and had gotten his account, and he relayed the information to Albus in turn.

"Just appeared? Interesting, very interesting," Albus replied with a mutter as he stood up from his desk and went over to stand beside his window.

"What do you know about this situation that I do not, Albus?" Severus asked when the man didn't elaborate.

"I believe that I will have to do a bit of research on that before I can give you a complete answer, my dear boy. I suspect however, that the castle herself may have taken a hand in this—figuratively speaking of course, Severus," Albus concluded, turning back to him with a thoughtful look on his wizened face.

"Hmph," Severus grunted in some dissatisfaction. "There is one other thing that I would like to speak with you about, headmaster,"

he added after another moment of silence had passed between them.

"Yes?" Albus asked, sitting back down at his desk and lacing his fingers together in what looked far too much like anticipation.

The man is a sadist, was Severus's unbidden thought.

"What of Harry's guardianship?"

"What of it?" His employer asked with an unchanging look of would be benign interest.

"Where will he stay this summer? Who is his legal guardian now that the Dursleys have been deemed unfit?"

"Such interest in the boy, Severus! One might even mistakenly think that you were beginning to care for the child."

Severus scowled at the scorn he felt he could hear in the man's voice.

"He is a snake, Albus. He's one of my responsibilities, and as such, he should be put somewhere that he will be safe."

"He will be sixteen at the end of the summer, Severus. I had thought that perhaps he could stay at Grimmauld house until that point," was the old man's casual answer.

"You cannot be serious, Albus," Severus exclaimed, getting to his feet to better glare at the man still sitting calmly across the desk from him.

"And why should I not be serious?"

"Did it not occur to you that Grimmauld house is where Sirius raped him?" Severus was furious enough to allow himself to be blunt about the entire situation.

The light dimmed in Albus's eyes as he contemplated his words, and Severus waited tentatively for the man to answer him.

"I had not thought of it like that, my dear boy," Albus answered slowly, his voice sounding much older than it had previously.

"He does not deserve to be treated like that. He does not deserve for you to shove it in his face either. Albus," he paused, looking at the old man in front of him with a brief flash of pity. "You would do well not to mention those plans to Harry," he finished in a softer voice.

"I take that you would not have brought Harry up unless you already had tentative plans of your own, correct?"

When do I not have plans, old man?

"Harry and I have spent a great deal of time together thus far this term," Severus began slowly.

Damn, this is far harder to put into words than I would have thought.

"You have indeed," Dumbledore replied with a small smile.

"As a result, we have developed something of a rapport," Severus continued as though he had not been interrupted.

"Indeed?" Albus prompted, leaning back in his chair.

"I believe that I am the best option he has for continued healing and growth."

It was a simple sentence that conveyed so much beyond the words he was speaking.

Severus scowled again as Albus's eyes began twinkling again full force.

"Don't twinkle at me, old man," Severus huffed in discomfort; sitting back down in his chair and crossing his arms defensively over his chest. "The boy needs a responsible adult. I am a responsible adult. It is only simple logic. Surely even you can see that."

"Surely I can," Albus said, seeming inordinately pleased with Severus's admittance.

"If you will excuse me, there are two boys under the age of sixteen alone in my quarters," he said, standing up and heading towards the door. His hand was on the latch when Albus finally asked him the question that he had been waiting for since beginning the damnable conversation.

"Severus," he heard Albus say and he turned slightly towards the man, his hand still on the door. "Does this mean what I think it means?"

"Likely enough it does," Severus answered a bit gruffly, not quite wanting to admit the words aloud.

"Are you sure?"

This time he swung all the way around and through gritted teeth, he answered. "Yes Albus. I'm sure that I want to adopt the bloody boy-who-lived. Is that all? Or would you also like a chance to discuss your blasted feelings?" He spat out the word like an epithet. The entire thing made him uncomfortable and he wanted nothing more than to be allowed to go back down to his nice comfortable dungeons, where a certain green eyed boy was eagerly awaiting his return.

Albus only smiled at him, as though he found his anger and discomfort utterly endearing.

"I will begin the paperwork, Severus," he heard as he descended the stairwell back down to the land of the sane.

"You'd better," he muttered dark to himself.

It was later that evening, after the boy—whom his brain had tentatively begun referring to as his boy, despite his efforts to curb its enthusiasm for the idea—and the younger Creevey lad had gone to bed, that found Severus wide awake and pacing in his sitting room. He had tried sleeping, but his mind had been far too awake, and even a touch fearful, if he were being entirely honest with himself.

What if the boy didn't want to be adopted by the greasy git of the dungeons?

He didn't want the lad to agree to the idea simply because there was no better option either. He wanted this to be the right thing for his student to have in his life, and damn it, he wanted to allow the child a chance at happiness, even if it were for a short time.

It was after three in the morning when his floo flared, rousing him out of the depressive funk he had found himself slowly slipping into. He had conversed with Poppy and then shut down the floo in order to grab his robes and shoes; stopping only to pen a short note for Harry that he stuck atop the dining table, before finally going through fireplace himself to find a nervous Poppy waiting on the other side for him.

"Is it Mr. Creevey?" Were the first words that burst out of his mouth upon spotting the woman.

A short serious nod was her answer, and then she led him to where the boy was resting in the back corner of the infirmary.

At first glance, the boy seemed nothing like his former self. He was pale and far skinnier than Severus had remembered him being; the skin under his eyes almost dark enough to be bruised. He could see the remains of a healing gash along his crown, but there were no other obvious signs of injury.

However, Poppy would not have floored him in the middle of the night unless something dire had occurred.

"What did you find?" He asked, steeling himself for the answer.

"Severe concussion, two cracked ribs, various bruises along his torso and lower back," she paused for breath and Severus looked at her calculatingly. Lower back? He supposed that might occur with a fall, but not in a typical attack, unless the attacker had got him on the ground and started kicking him.

He knew all too well just how much that hurt too.

"More seriously though, Severus, his rectum shows signs of having been torn and only partially healed by his magic, and according to the two house elves that brought him to me, he also seems to be suffering from some form of amnesia," she said, raising a hand to forestall any other comments from him. "And before you ask, he was

found at the bottom of the stairwell on the fifth floor; the one that is farthest out on the east side of the castle."

"The most isolated one," Severus amended for her, his eyes dark and serious as he contemplated exactly what she had said. "How likely is it that the bruising on his lower back is related to his being raped?"

He knew that he was right when she didn't rebuke him for his assumption that the child had been attacked in such a heinous fashion.

"Considering the fact that the bruising and the rectum injuries occurred on the same day, I'd say that it's very likely," her voice was steely, a sure sign of her anger towards whatever monster had done this to two of their students.

"And his amnesia?"

"He was not obliterated, Severus," she answered, following his train of thought easily.

"Can you do anything to help him regain his memory?"

"You know better than I do just how tricky memory work can be, especially following an injury as tragic as the ones both he and Miss Granger experienced," she answered slowly, her eyes on the boy in front of them.

"And?"

"I'm afraid that this type of healing is far over my ability level. I'm going to have to call in help."

"I don't need to impress upon you the importance of only bringing in someone you can trust," Severus looked searchingly over her face.

"I know," she turned to him with a small pained smile on her face. "I've got someone in mind that I've known for a very long time."

"Good," he replied with some relief. "How is Miss Granger getting along?" He was curious about this other healer, but he could also see that Poppy had said all she was going to say at the moment.

"Would you like you join me for a cup of tea in my office?" Poppy asked in response, glancing at him and then shifting her eyes to the doorway that led to the private rooms.

"Please," he answered agreeably. Sure, it was nearly four in the morning, but since it was the weekend, he had a chance to catch up on missed sleep the next day. Besides, he was used to not sleeping.

They moved to the other side of the infirmary and Poppy closed the door behind them and cast a silencing spell.

"I believe Miss Granger was spying on me earlier," she informed him with an amused tilt of her mouth.

"When?" Severus asked, taking a seat opposite his old friend.

"When I floored you, I heard a creak of a door," Poppy explained with that same small smile. She busied herself with the preparations of the tea while he waited patiently for her to answer his previous question.

"Decaf, Severus," she answered after he had taken a sip from the cup she had handed him. He made a face, but otherwise didn't complain. She was right. If he wanted to get any sleep that night, then it would not do to be drinking caffeinated beverages before trying to do so.

"What is it about her spying that amuses you so much?"

"Other than it reminds me of a little black haired Slytherin boy I once knew?" She asked with an innocent face.

"I did not spy then," he corrected her. "I merely lurked. There is a difference," he added with a small upturn of his lips.

"Of course there is," she replied with an even bigger smile. "Actually, regarding Miss Granger, I was rather pleased that something caught her attention enough to draw her out of her room. She has been very withdrawn ever since arriving here, and while I understand the reasons, it still doesn't mean that I want her to give into them and completely shut down."

"Has Minerva been keeping in contact with her?" Severus asked very carefully. If Hermione had been one of his own snakes, he would have been there every day, if possible.

"I know you don't think the most of Minerva right now, Severus," Poppy leveled him with a knowing glare, "but I think you should give her a second chance. She has been doing more than just keeping in contact; she has been visiting and even tutoring the girl when her schedule has allowed for it."

"And is Miss Granger responding positively?" He asked, raising an interested eyebrow.

"She hasn't turned her away yet," was Poppy's ambiguous response.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Her counselor visits twice a week, and offhand I can only think of a handful of times that Miss Granger has not forced her to leave early—usually in tears and shrieking all to high heaven as well."

"Miss Granger?" Severus looked incredulous.

"Her counselor is versed in the art of legilimency, and from what I have gathered from the screaming bouts from Miss Granger, the woman has not yet been able to determine the identity of Hermione's attacker, because the girl is subconsciously shielding his face."

He wasn't expecting to hear that.

"Unusual," he remarked.

"The girl's been through a lot, Severus," Poppy chastised lightly.

"She's not the only one," he growled; his mind shifting automatically to Harry and then on to the youngest Weasley.

It was strange how many things Miss Weasley and Miss Granger potentially had in common.

"Would it be possible to get Ginny Weasley and Hermione Granger together sometime?"

"What are you planning?" Poppy looked at him suspiciously.

"I think they would be beneficial for one another," it was his turn to be ambiguous. "Really Poppy, I cannot tell you what I do not know," was his only explanation.

"Hm," was all the matron said, but he could tell that she was intrigued. He had heard that Poppy had roots in Slytherin. He had often wondered if it was true.

"I suppose I could arrange something," was her grudging response after a few moments of silence.

"Thank you," he answered softly and got to his feet. It was time for bed—past time, actually.

. . .

Although he hated to leave Hermione alone for any amount of time, Ron had yet to visit her in the infirmary for fear of triggering some kind of wayward memory. He wasn't afraid of the girl—far from it actually, considering what they had been through together just that term—but he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that her remembering would undoubtedly lead to problems from other corners of wizarding society; problems that he would just as well prefer to avoid.

He had wanted to keep her isolated though, and originally had been planning on telling the other Gryffindors some kind of farce about her needing space for recuperation. However, it had turned into a bit of a moot point, as no one was quite comfortable with visiting her following such a thing.

Such a thing, he sniggered to himself at the thought. Even if Potter the Frotter wasn't ever arrested for the crime, he still had succeeded in permanently tarnishing the other boy's reputation.

Perfect Potty, loved by the whole world round, even if he is a common whore. The thought made him laugh. He felt like dancing—no, skipping—around the common room a few dozen times. He'd love to catch Harry alone sometime and really make him understand just what he was good for, just what they were both good for.

He certainly had been made aware of his own worth—or lack thereof—as a child under his Uncle Rodney's tutelage.

Bastard.

It had been a lesson too difficult to forget, even if he had tried. And he had tried a lot.

Time to pay the piper, he heard in a sing songy voice inside his head. His eyes involuntarily went to the letter he had received in the mail the day before. Uncle Rodney was coming for a visit up to Hogwarts. He couldn't just very well tell the man "no" either. Without Rodney, there was no Hogwarts. The man was his bloody sponsor. As his mum was wont towards pointing out, he owed the man for his entire future to come.

Well, what about his past? Was Rodney to have stolen his childhood from him as well as his adult life?

Without knowing it, Ron's mouth had twisted into a very pained looking smile. Regardless of how the thing with Hermione went, he would have his revenge on the man who had delighted in making his life hell.

Somehow, he swore to himself. Someday.

. . .

"Harry?" Severus asked later the next day, interrupting the chess game between his snake and the youngest Creevey boy.

"Sir?"

"What did I tell you about saying that word in my quarters?" He shot back, his lips upturned just slightly.

"Sorry Severus," Harry replied with a cheeky, if slightly contrite looking grin.

"I need to have a private word with you. Would you be so kind as to give us a few moments by ourselves Mr. Creevey?" He asked, turning his attention to the tiny boy sitting across from Harry.

The small boy nodded quickly and then scampered into Harry's room, closing the door quietly behind him. Once the other boy was gone, Severus allowed himself to briefly give into his urge to smile more broadly in amusement at the child; something which Harry echoed silently in his own face.

"Come and sit by me Harry," Severus instructed, waving his snake over to the sofa.

"Okay," the lad answered quietly, a small look of confusion passing over his face as he did so.

"Nothing bad is going on, Harry. At least not from my point of view," Severus tried to placate the boy. Merlin knew he was already nervous enough about what he was going to say. He didn't need the extra stress of frightening the child out of his wits for no reason on top of that.

He waited until Harry had sat down beside him to begin speaking.

"Harry, we get along fairly well, don't you think?" Severus tried to keep his voice calm, casual. It was a great deal harder than normal, considering the circumstances.

"Yeah," the boy nodded a bit warily.

"I've thought so as well. I must admit that I've become a bit fond of you as of lately, as surprising as that might have once been to contemplate."

He waited until Harry gave him a nod and then he continued. He could feel his palms sweating and he fought the childish urge to wipe them on his slacks.

"Now, it has occurred to me that you are currently without any sort of suitable guardian, and I think I might have come up with a solution for that."

Harry's eyes had widened ever so slightly and Severus had to fight with himself not to delve into the boy's mind in order to really find out how he was feeling.

"Harry, I recently asked the headmaster if it would be acceptable for me to adopt you. He said yes."

The boy seemed to be holding his breath.

"I want to know whether this would be agreeable to you as well."

Severus watched in silent trepidation as the child blinked several times and then looked away in thought.

"Could I th-think on it for a little bit?" Harry's voice was very soft, timid even.

"Certainly." Severus wasn't sure what to think.

"I've gotten into enough trouble from rushing headlong into things like a foolish Gryffindor. I just want to make sure that this is the best idea for me, a-and for you too Severus," the child's voice had dropped into a whisper.

"A wise and mature answer Harry," Severus replied levelly, despite the noise of his heart's wildly pounding beats within his mind.

With that, the boy excused himself to his room, leaving Severus alone with his own concerns.

Chapter 18 – Safety Concerns

Harry closed the door to his room behind him with a trembling hand.

"Harry!" Dennis's shrill voice interrupted his thinking.

"Dennis? Are you okay?"

"Why didn't you say yes, Harry! You shoulda said yes! Why didn't you?" Dennis had latched his much smaller hands around Harry's arm and insistently was pulling him over the bed.

"It's a pretty big decision Dennis," Harry started out slowly, now seated next to the smaller boy on the side of his bed.

"But I thought that you said Snape liked you now!"

"He does—at least I think he does," Harry answered; his eyes on the floor as his brain fought to catch up with the situation.

"Then what's the problem?" Dennis implored, not understanding his friend's hesitancy.

"Well, he'll be in charge of everything about my life, right?" He didn't wait on an answer from the smaller boy, but continued on in a rush. "Like discipline! He'll be in charge of discipline! What if he hurts me? What if he does something that I can't live with? He's not exactly the easiest person to talk to!"

"Harry, Snape saved you back when he hated you!" Dennis said, hopping off the bed and scowling at the older boy. "If he didn't hurt you when he didn't like you, why would he hurt you when he did?"

Harry opened his mouth and then closed it again as the second year's words sunk in.

"I dunno," he answered shyly, rubbing his feet together nervously, his eyes still on the floor.

"And I don't know him as well as you do, but he seems to listen pretty well to you whenever you say anything to him. He even stops and looks up," Dennis added helpfully, crouching down at Harry's

feet in an attempt to try and catch his gaze. "My dad doesn't even do that," he added wistfully.

For whatever reason, Dennis's comment about his own father caught Harry's attention.

"What's your dad like Dennis? You never talk about him much," Harry prompted, finally looking at the other boy.

Dennis sat down on the ground with his arms around his knees and peered up at him with an unhappy expression.

"He doesn't talk a whole lot. I mean, he does about his job—he's a milkman, remember? But he doesn't seem to listen a whole lot when me and—and Col' tell him stuff." Dennis's voice had dropped into a whisper at the mention of his wayward brother. "I mean, he takes really good care of us and all, and he's never forgotten to pick us up or anything, but," the smaller boy looked away and stared intently at the wall for a few moments. "Col' said he's just being sad."

"About what?"

"Mum left us just after I turned one, when Col' was three, and dad's had to raise us by himself since then. Colin thinks that dad misses mum something awful, and sometimes I wonder," the small boy trailed off.

"What do you wonder?" Harry prompted, peering interestedly at the other boy. He had never heard either boy discuss their mother, and he didn't know anyone else who had either.

"Maybe if he didn't have to take care of us, maybe he woulda gone after her. Maybe if we hadn't been born, she never would have left in the first place."

"Oh Dennis," Harry said sadly, sliding off the bed to put an arm around him. "You don't know that," he added, not knowing enough of the story to say much more.

"Yeah," the boy said softly, scrubbing an arm across his eyes quickly. "I don't." He turned and looked back at Harry before continuing. "But I do know one thing."

"What?"

"Snape wouldn't leave you," the small boy said fiercely. "Even if he was angry at you, he wouldn't leave you."

. . .

Someone was knocking at his door. Rodney Weasley checked to make sure he had his wand on him before answering the door.

"Percy! What a pleasant surprise!" He said brightly, waving the young adult into his house with an overly large smile.

"Uncle Rodney," Percy returned his greeting with a formal nod as he stepped forwards into his living room.

It wasn't until the door was shut behind him that Rodney gave him a true welcome. Pushing the red haired young man into the wall with his body, Rodney grasped Percy's head and savagely kissed his tauntingly red lips, slipping his tongue in as Percy tried to catch a short breath.

"My, you certainly have grown," Rodney said appreciatively when he finally released his nephew's mouth. "You should visit more often," he added suggestively with a grin.

"I'm a very busy man, Uncle," Percy countered, trying to look angry but failing with the hurt little boy look that was coming through his eyes.

"A man eh? Got any pretty young lasses you'd like to introduce me to?"

"None you'd be interested in. My girlfriend is an adult and very outspoken," was Percy's cool response.

"Oh? And what of my precious niece?" Rodney asked with an ugly leer.

He was pleased to see his nephew's face pale dramatically at his words. I haven't lost my touch!

"W-What of her?" The boy stammered slightly.

"I've heard some interesting rumors there, Percy boy," he smiled, putting an arm around the lad's shoulders and pulling him over to sit on the sofa.

"From whom?" Percy's eyes were calculating as his color came back to his face.

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about it, Percy," Rodney answered, laughing good naturedly as he leaned in and kissed the young man's bright pink cheek. "You and me are going to go and visit Hogwarts today—get a chance to see the children. Don't you just bet little Ronnie is missing me by now?"

Percy snorted in response, shifting his body ever so slightly away from him.

"Isn't that why you agreed to see me today? Get a chance to see them?" Rodney gave him a knowing wink.

"My business there is purely professional," Percy said with a sneer, getting to his feet and heading back towards the door.

"Of course it is. Just like mine is. Oh, and Percy?"

His nephew turned and gave him a wary look.

"Stupefy," he calmly cast on the boy, watching him fall to the floor with a smile far darker than any of the rest he had given that morning.

. . .

"Ah thank you for being so prompt Ms. Weasley," Poppy said, ushering Ginny into her office. She had sent her a note requesting her presence after breakfast, and thankfully the young fourth year had complied immediately.

"Of course ma'am," Ginny answered, bowing her head slightly.

Poppy instructed her to take a seat and offered her tea, watching the girl's movements and behaviors while she did so. Severus had all but told her that Ginny had been mistreated the same as Ms.

Granger and Mr. Creevey, and she wanted to see for herself just how much truth there was to that supposition.

"As you are likely already aware, Ms. Granger has been moved to the infirmary until her the concerns about her safety have been put to rest."

Poppy wasn't surprised to see Ginny nod in understanding at her information. The only ones at the Hogwarts that didn't know everything that was happening in the school were a few of the less popular teachers and staff members; Hagrid and Filch came to mind immediately, but she was sure there were a few others. Trelawney, she thought with a quiet sniff of disdain.

Nevertheless, secrets of this caliber didn't stand a chance against the rabid gossipmongers that existed within the ranks of their students. If only said gossips would help them find the perpetrator or perpetrators of these crimes!

"What concerns me now though is Ms. Granger's relative lack of visitors," Poppy stated, looking over her glasses at the young girl sitting nervously in front of her. Yes, Severus was right. The child looks exhausted and her nails have been bitten down to the quick!

"Ma'am?" Ginny glanced questioningly up at her.

"I hope I'm not imposing on you dear," Poppy smiled benignly at her, sharp eyes carefully taking in the girl's rumpled dress and mismatched socks. "But could you possibly make some time in your schedule to visit Ms. Granger? I know that the two of you have gotten along well in the past, and really I think you might be just what the poor girl needs."

"Oh!" Ginny looked up at her suggestion with a look of dawning comprehension splashed across her face. "Do you really think that I would be a good option for her?"

"My dear," Poppy said encouragingly, "I can think of none better."

. . .

Ginny found herself timidly knocking on Hermione Granger's door less than twenty minutes later.

"Who's there?" She heard the muffled sound of the slightly older girl's voice through the door.

"It's me." She realized how idiotic that sounded, so she added, "Ginny. It's me, Ginny Weasley."

There was no immediate response, and then suddenly the door opened just a crack and she saw half of Hermione's face looking out at her somberly.

"Who sent you?" Was the wary question she heard.

"Poppy."

Immediately, the door sprung open, almost as though the matron's name was a password of some kind.

"Come on in," was Hermione's slightly apathetic sounding answer.

She did just that, moving into the girl's private room slowly, not really surprised to hear the door shut behind her moments later. What did surprise her though was the relatively low number of books present throughout the room. In fact, as Ginny's keen eyes further took in her settings, she slowly came to realize that the only books there were the standard grade five spell books.

"How have you been?" Ginny felt like a dunce for asking such an idiotic question.

A shrug was Hermione's only response.

"Yeah, me too," Ginny whispered, her eyes on the ground. This was clearly a bad idea. What had made Poppy think that her visiting Hermione could possibly be a good idea?

...

Percy woke up with a groan. He felt wrecked, like he'd just been in a high speed broom accident with an out of control bludger. He opened his eyes slowly, the world unusually blurry around his head.

Wait, why am I in Uncle Rodney's room? His thoughts were muddled for a moment as his brain fought to catch up with the realization. Abruptly it hit him and he tried to sit up, only to fall back in a drug addled heap.

"Poor little Percy," he heard his uncle say somewhere nearby.

"Why are you doing this?" He groaned out angrily. He'd done his time. His school was paid for. Rodney wasn't allowed to do this anymore. Not to him.

"What did I teach you about discretion, Percy?" Distantly he felt Rodney moving around in the room.

"Never get caught," Percy repeated dully, his head aching too much to open his eyes again.

"And what did you do? You were careless! You let little Ronnie see you with her." The man's voice was closer and he instinctively tried to move backwards away from it. "You know what that means?"

Percy kept his mouth shut. Unless he was very much mistaken, Rodney was standing less than an arm's length from his left side. Carefully he ran his hands over his pockets, only to curse in his mind as they each came up empty. Where the fuck is my wand?

"Damage control," Rodney hissed, leaning in close enough for Percy to feel his breath on his cheek. It made him want to shiver in revulsion, but he daredn't. Not now.

"You should have obliterated them both when you had the chance," Rodney's hand was now on his cheek, burning hot in comparison with his cold clammy skin. "Didn't I ever teach you anything?" The hand pinched his cheek—hard enough to cause him to yelp aloud.

"Fuck or be fucked! Isn't that right?" Percy screamed back suddenly, drunkenly throwing his uncoordinated body at his uncle in his fury.

Rodney caught him easily, throwing him face down on the bed and pulling his hands up over his head with one meaty fist.

"Guess I was mistaken for thinking you were smarter than the average Weasley," the bastard hissed his ear, striking him to the core with his harsh words.

"I am!" Percy retorted with a yell.

Rodney's only response was to put his unoccupied hand on the back of Percy's slacks and begin pulling them down.

"No! I don't have to do this anymore!" Percy yelled out in a strangled voice, bucking up as hard as he could against his uncle's much stronger presence.

"Apparently you do," Rodney whispered viciously as he settled his weight more fully on top of his still writhing body.

What happened next was both horrible and familiar, and as always, reduced Percy to screams after only a few moments.

. . .

Dennis snuck out of Harry's room after nearly an hour of discussion, a determined look on his young face as he sought to find a way to make Harry understand exactly why Snape was such a good fit for him.

Luckily for him, Snape was still in the sitting room, and it was with a Gryffindorish burst of courage that allowed him to approach the intimidating man. Snape appeared to be reading some kind of Potions journal, but he didn't seem particularly entranced in it, as evidenced by his comment to Dennis.

"And just where do you think you're going?" The Slytherin head asked without looking up from his text.

"I'm looking for you," was Dennis's brave response as he marched over to the man's chair and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"Really," answered his professor in a very unimpressed way.

"Yeah," Dennis huffed, finally causing the austere man to look up at him.

Had Dennis been Harry, he would have seen the amusement shining out of Snape's face, but since he was not, all he saw was a dark eyed professor glaring back at him after being interrupted from something much more important.

"And why, pray tell, would my presence be necessary for your convoluted plans?"

"Cause I need you to get Harry's friends for him," Dennis answered quickly, before he lost his nerve. He didn't think he'd ever been this close to the man before, and he wasn't entirely certain that he ever could stand to be so again.

"Why can he not simply get them himself?"

"Because he doesn't know he needs them! Come on sir, he needs to hear from people his own age about what a good dad you'd make!"

Oh hell, I'm going to die.

For a moment, Snape just stared back at him, as though he were a potion gone horribly horribly wrong. Then, he just seemed to snap out of it.

"You believe that do you, Mr. Creevey?"

"Of course!" Dennis squeaked nervously, wringing his hands together as he did. "You listen to him—like you really do care! I can see it in the way you watch him, sir. If anything were to happen to him, you'd be devastated," he added, nodding enthusiastically as he peered up into the unblinking visage before him.

Finally, Snape nodded at him and stood up gracefully.

"I will bring Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Zabini here. I shall need to trust you not to leave my quarters. Can you do that?"

"Yes sir!"

"Good."

. . .

Rodney was much more relaxed when he finally apparated to Hogsmeade. He was content in the knowledge that Percy wasn't going to be doing much for the next twenty-four hours as he healed from the rather brutal lesson that Rodney had been forced to give him. He knew that Percy had planned to visit Hogwarts with him, but he had always preferred to do things on his own, and having another person in his vicinity would have merely distracted him from his goal. It would be hard enough speaking to Ronald under Dumbledore's nose without raising any suspicion. It likely would have been impossible with a pompous twat dogging his every step.

Now really, that was a bit unfair to the boy. He knew that Percy was anything but pompous, that it was almost entirely bravado on his part, but the knowledge didn't help him to find the boy's behavior any less annoying.

Percy had always been far more sensitive than his brothers. In a way, that had been what had helped him gain a foothold in the boy's life. No one listened to the quiet one, no one except Uncle Rodney. Neither of his parents had time for a good, rule abiding child in the face of such wild hellions like Bill, Charlie and the twins.

But Uncle Rodney did have time. Poor Rodney, widowed at the tender age of twenty-three when his dear sweet wife had died in a freak flooing accident. As he told the Prophet, "She always had been a mumblar." Widowed, heartbroken from the death of his best friend/mate and childless, he had been a cheap romance novel in the making. The story was almost enough to make him vomit from the sweetness. On the other hand, the death of his wife hadn't been all tears and sniffles, especially considering the millions of galleons that she had left him in her will. She had been the last of a dwindling family, and he had received the leftovers from that legacy. He hadn't minded that part in the least.

Of course, no one would ever know that his dearest wife had been dead before she had ever left their floo grate. Details really could be a pain when it came to getting the truth. Luckily for him, all anyone had ever been interested in was the story, an entirely separate affair altogether.

Speaking of affairs, now that was an interesting subject as well. Rodney, nearly two years younger than his dearest brother Arthur, had a bit of an unusual talent for Potions. Certainly, some of his

family had done well in the subject, but none had ever truly been smitten by it like him. Of course, his family being what it was, he had to be careful not to outshine any of his older brothers, particularly in such a borderline dark field like Potions. So he had bided his time, kept his interests to himself, and when the moment had been right, he had polyjuiced himself and switched places with Arthur for a day. He knew the old boy well enough to pull off being him for twenty-four hours, and no one had been the wiser, not even Molly.

Lo and behold, it hadn't been much of a surprise to him that Molly had given birth to one Percy Weasley just nine months after their fateful coupling. Of course, perhaps his judicious use of ovulating and pregnancy potions had helped, but he certainly wouldn't have classified them as major factors. In fact, he didn't mention very much of his life to anyone. If he'd ever had a friend in whom he felt he could trust, he might have told that person just how much like a black sheep he had felt from the beginning of life, but by this point, he had mastered the art of deception, and it was no longer as obvious to him, let alone anyone else.

Like his relationship to Percy, he had always felt an unusually strong connection with Ronald, and quite possibly for the same reason as well. He hadn't enjoyed taking Arthur's place in the bedroom, but he had enjoyed taking away a piece—however small—of his brother's burgeoning familial kingdom.

It wasn't that women didn't like him; quite the opposite in fact. They had practically fallen over themselves in their pursuit of him after the sudden death of his wife. Rather however, it had more to do with his complete and utter disdain for them. Getting rid of one idiot brained spouse had been problematic enough—after all, some of those poisons were very hard to lay one's hands on without a great deal of time and fuss—but it would have been damn near impossible to purposely rid himself of a second one.

It had just been so ridiculously easy to insert himself into the lives of his favorite two nephews. No one had questioned him for having favorites. His brother and sister-in-law were busy enough with their brood as a whole to spend any time worrying about any potentially unhealthy interest of his in one (or two) of theirs.

Of course, he had been forced to be very careful and very discrete towards his affections in the early days. He could do nothing specific, nothing that would bring Molly and Arthur's attention back to him. It would have been far easier if he could have just obliterated the boys after their visits, but children—despite their innate resiliency—tended to be unusually sensitive to having their memories wiped, and therefore more likely to react negatively. Not only that, but obliuations were far easier to trace in children than in adults. It was like some kind of damned double edged sword, but he had managed to make it work in spite of the challenges he had faced.

. . .

Hermione looked at Ginny with a critical eye of her own. Perhaps she, because she had been so far removed from the other girl for such a long time, was better equipped in seeing the changes that everyone else had long taken for granted.

"How long have you not been sleeping?" She asked abruptly, cutting through the uncomfortable mess that their conversation had turned into in one fell swoop.

"What d-do you mean?" Ginny asked, caught off guard.

"How. Long. Have. You. Not. Been. Sleeping?" Hermione asked again, stepping closer to the red haired girl with every word until they were standing practically nose to nose.

"I just had bad dreams last night. It's no big deal," Ginny answered dismissively.

"Liar," Hermione shot back, but not in a cruel way.

"What did you just call me?" Ginny's face was pink with indignation.

"I said that you are a liar," Hermione's eyes glowed fiercely with some of her previous spark.

"Oh, you so do not want to be going there, Hermione," Ginny warned.

"Yeah, and what'll you do, curse me? Hit me? Trust me when I tell you that I'm not scared of anything you can do."

She had been through far worse indeed, and distantly in her mind, she could hear herself pleading with her unknown assailant to please stop hurting her. Please, it hurts, please!

Unbeknownst to Hermione, she had stopped and frozen in the middle of the room, her eyes open and glazed as she relived some of the horrors committed against her.

Their argument forgotten, Ginny found herself staring open mouthed at the sudden change in the other girl.

"Please!"

Ginny didn't know what kind of nightmare her friend was caught up in, but she knew it wasn't good. Finally getting her head back on straight, she ran for the door and yelled into the hallway for Madam Pomfrey. Rushing back into the room, she made it just in time to catch Hermione's head as she dropped boneless to the floor, sparing her the trials of a concussion in addition to her crippling flashback.

. . .

Harry was pacing mindlessly in his room, trying to give himself a break from all the thinking he had been doing since his conversations with Severus and then Dennis, when he heard a knock on the outside of his door.

"Come in!" Severus never just knocked; usually he said his name too. Besides, why would Severus be visiting him now?

To his great surprise, Draco and Blaise loped into room and headed straight for him.

"Guys?" He asked when they didn't say anything, but instead silently picked him up and carried him into the sitting room, plunking him down on the sofa in front of Severus. They sat down on either side of him, while Dennis appeared out of nowhere and plunked down at his feet.

"What's going on?" He asked shakily, eyes darting from person to person.

"You two need to talk," Draco answered, pointing at him and Severus. "And we're here to make sure that you do."

"And for moral support," Blaise added softly from his other side.

"Talk?" Harry hated the way his voice squeaked when he was under pressure.

"Yes, talk."

"About?"

"Don't be obtuse," Draco chastised. "You're going to talk to Severus about the conditions of your adoption."

"Conditions?"

"Well sure Harry," Blaise said with a smile. "As a Slytherin you should know better than to ever just blindly sign a contract without reading all of the small print, let alone adding a few stipulations of your own in the process. Really, you don't know what you can get if you never ask."

"So Severus," Draco turned back to their head of house. "What will you do to discipline Harry should the need ever arise?"

Harry slowly raised his gaze, catching the eye of his would be guardian as he did.

"You all really think this is a good idea?" He asked before Severus could get out his first word.

"Yes," Draco and Blaise said in unison, giving identical exasperated sighs and causing Dennis to giggle a little at their antics.

"Now shut up and let the man tell you just how much he cares about you," Draco instructed with a stern look.

"Okay," Harry complied with a shy smile at his—well, at Severus.

"Good boy," Blaise quipped with a wide grin.

. . .

Distantly, in another part of the castle, the sludge had continued creeping out and through the various cracks of the foundation, seeking out something only it could sense.

Chapter 19 – A Fluffy Interlude

A/N – Drat. I went and made myself cry on this chapter.

"Severus?" Harry's hesitant voice interrupted his thinking one evening a few days after Blaise and Draco had taken it upon themselves to foist a family intervention on them. Severus was seated on the sofa, where he had been surrounded by lesson plans. At hearing Harry's voice though, he had gathered them up into a pile and set them aside.

"Harry? Don't stand there in the doorway like a stranger. Come and sit down," he said, waving the boy over to the spot next to him.

"What's on your mind?" He prompted when the lad didn't immediately say anything.

"I just wanted to ask a few more questions, if that's okay," the small teenager said nervously.

"Certainly," Severus agreed easily. "It's a completely new situation for you. It's natural that you should have questions."

He watched in mild amusement as the boy fiddled with his pajamas, brow furrowed in thought. Severus was glad that Dennis was spending the night in the infirmary in order to be near his brother. It meant that they could have this conversation to themselves.

"Does—," Harry finally started out slowly. "Does this adoption thing mean that I'll now be considered your son?"

Adoption thing; yes, that certainly was one way of putting it.

"It does," Severus nodded, looking closely at the teen beside him.

"Are y-you sure that you really want that?"

"Want what, Harry?"

"I mean, are you sure that you really want to saddle yourself with me?" Harry finished the sentence with a small squeak, his hands tightly clasped together around his knees, which he had drawn up to his chest.

Severus frowned and put his hands on the boy's shoulders, turning him easily to the side so that they were facing one another directly.

"You say that as though you consider yourself to be worthless," he admonished gently. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

Unfortunately, Severus already knew what the child's answer would be. It was far too obvious.

Harry shrugged and tightened his arms even further. "Well, I'm not exactly a great catch, you know? Wouldn't your time be better spent adopting Draco or Blaise? I mean, it seems to me that they really need someone too, and I'm just gonna get in your way really, and—," Severus cut him off with a hand, but managed to keep his glare down to a minimum.

"If I tell you something, can I trust you to keep your mouth shut about it and not mention it to another soul?" Severus asked, deciding to let the boy in on something he hadn't ever planned on telling anyone else.

A wide eyed Harry nodded warily.

"Then listen to me, and listen well, because I shall not be repeating this in such concise terms ever again."

Harry nodded again, unconsciously leaning forwards a bit in his earnestness.

"I care for Draco and Blaise deeply. And truthfully, I do tend to think of them as my family. But you Harry, I think of you as more than just everyday kind of family. I want you as my son," he had taken the teen's cold hands in his much larger ones, and was gripping them securely.

"B-B-But why?" Silent tears were shimmering in the lad's large green eyes, making them just that much more expressive.

"Why?"

The boy nodded, wiping at an errant tear with his shoulder, as Severus had yet to release his hands.

"Because I'm fond of you, silly boy. Every time we interact, you remind me so much of myself. Your past guardians hurt you badly, but you are not damaged goods, despite what you might believe. You are smart and have an eye for detail that most of my students lack. You could become a great potions master someday, do you understand?" Severus could keep his voice steady no longer; and abruptly found himself releasing the child's hands, and pulling him up against his side a moment later.

"I want you to rise, triumph over those who have hurt you. I want to help you in that task, but more importantly, I want to give you the tools necessary for living as an adult in our world and in the muggle one. You are so very bright, so intelligent. And your heart is kind. It is obvious from your interactions with the younger students, not just my little snakes. You could do whatever you wanted with your life. Don't you understand child? I am lucky to have a chance to provide you with a family. I am the lucky one. Me."

Thin arms had crept around his torso as he had talked, and now in the silence, he could hear—and feel—shuddery sobs coming from the lad from where his face was pressed tightly into Severus's chest.

"Me," Severus said again, whispering into Harry's hair, one hand wrapped around the teen's head and the other around his shoulders. "I want you to be my family, and trust me when I tell you that I can think of no better person to make my son."

. . .

Harry felt warm from where he was pressed up against his guardian. His tears had faded, but now instead of the empty feeling often leftover after an unhappy outpouring of emotion, the feeling within him was one of fullness, and perhaps even a wary sort of completeness.

Would it last? Was he even allowed to be happy? Was that okay?

Sometimes—if not most of the time—Harry felt as though the universe was conspiring against him, purposely keeping him downtrodden in order to fulfill its own sick, twisted goals.

Or maybe that's just Dumbledore, he thought darkly.

His head slipped a little on Severus's shoulder, but instead of shooing him off to bed, his guardian merely pulled him down a bit further, so that Harry's head was now resting in his lap. Automatically, he moved his legs up on the sofa and curled up against his professor comfortably. He could feel Severus's long fingers stroking his hair gently, and he wasn't sure whether he wanted to giggle or cry at how nice it was.

"Severus?" He asked softly.

"Hm?" The hands on his head didn't slow or stop, and he was grateful.

"You want me," he stated, trying it out for the first time.

"Yes," Severus's low voice rumbled gently through him.

"As your son," his voice felt thick in his ears, but he pushed through, because he very much wanted to say it aloud.

"Yes," Severus confirmed softly.

"And—And not as anything else, right sir?" Anxiety just barely in his voice. He knew what Severus meant, but he wanted to make sure. He just wanted to make sure.

"I just want you as my son, correct Harry," Severus answered gently, touching his fingers lightly to the scar on his face; the one that he had gotten from Uncle Vernon that previous summer.

Harry's heartbeat came up into his throat and he whimpered, turning his face down into dark charcoal coloured slacks.

"Shh, child," the hands resumed their petting of his head and he slowly relaxed again, blinking hard from where his tears had unexpectedly made an appearance in his eyes. "We will find a way to repay that wretched former family of yours, mark my words son."

Son! It was all he had ever wanted and then some.

"You won't get into trouble?" He whispered, feeling unusually fearful. The adoption hadn't even been finalized yet! What if something were to happen?

"I am a Slytherin, son. I know how to cover my tracks," Severus answered with a small smile just for him.

Harry relaxed a bit at his words. Being around Severus was nothing like being around the Weasleys, or hell, even Dumbledore. His guardian said nothing of luck, or of waiting for things to work out on their own. A Slytherin made plans. A Slytherin was proactive. And since Severus was the quintessential Slytherin, at least in his mind, then that meant that he—that they were as safe as they could possibly be.

He shivered a bit and realized that the fire was dying down.

"Is it time to go to bed?" He asked, feeling very small, very young for the first time in a great while.

"Perhaps it is, child."

"Will you tuck me in?" Yet another dream he had given up on a long time ago.

"I will," the normally stoic man said, that same small only-for-Harry smile still on his lips as he answered.

Chapter 20 – No Matter What

When Harry got up the next morning, it felt as though someone had repeatedly cast cheering charms on him while asleep. He opened his eyes and smiled up into the darkness of his room, his heart beating fast as he realized that a new day had started. It was a new day and he was Severus's son. He felt that he'd be able to withstand anything that happened that day, just with that knowledge securely in his heart.

It was going to be a good day, regardless of anyone else's plans. He swore it to himself. He deserved it, just this once.

"Just this once," he whispered to himself bravely, trying to prep himself for facing the world outside their chambers once more.

. . .

Earlier that week . . .

"Ronnie, my youngest nephew! How good it is to see you!" Rodney strode into the Gryffindor common room and straight up to the red haired young man with a wide toothy grin displayed for all to see. The Fat Lady had always liked him, and luckily still remembered his name, even though there were quite a few more red haired Weasleys wandering around than there had been in his day.

"Uncle," Ron answered curtly, standing in deference to him.

Or possibly just discomfort, he thought lasciviously.

Aware that the entire room's attention was on them, Rodney gave the boy a short bow and then nodded towards the doorway.

"Care to show your old uncle about the school a bit there, Ron?" He asked; giving another grin that was as much for the young man before him as it was for the room around them.

"Certainly," Ron answered crisply, his posture nearly perfect as he sought to move past him without touching.

Rodney dared not do anything more than pat his nephew's shoulder as they moved through the hallway towards a particularly out of the

way classroom that he knew about, but it was an entirely separate affair when that door had been shut behind them. His grin turned ugly for a moment and he felt a thrill at seeing the fifteen year-old before him shiver ever so slightly in return. He set about placing appropriate wards on the door, which in their own ways were nearly as blatant as placing a muggle "Do Not Disturb" sign on the knob.

Then he turned and opened his arms towards the boy.

It did not surprise him to see that his gesture for a hug was not reciprocated.

"Why are you here?" Ron hissed at him, pink coming up high in his cheeks for the first time since seeing each other.

"Oh dear oh dear. Little Ronnie seems to be a bit cranky. Perhaps he needs a nap?" He leered, turning swiftly to one of the older more broken down desks and transfiguring it into a posh king sized bed.

"You never visited Percy when he was at school," Ron accused, moving away from him, his wand already in his hand.

"Perhaps I did, dear Ronnie, and I just never told you about it, hm?" Rodney asked, making a show of undoing the fastenings on his robe and dropping it to the floor, leaving him in nothing but a plain white dress shirt and dark cords.

"I would have known," Ron answered, confirming a few theories for him as he did. He had long suspected of being followed more than just that once, but he had opted not to do anything about it.

"You did know. Right up until I obliterated you," he smiled even more widely as Ron's eyes widened in silent horror.

"How many times?" His nephew's voice sounded strained.

"You want me to count?" He asked; taking a few steps forwards. It wouldn't do to tell the boy that it had only been that once. It was far more exciting to torture him with the idea of it having happened multiple times.

"Tell me," Ron answered, foolishly trying to put that Gryffindor bravery to work.

"You want to know all the sordid details? Truly?" He answered, keeping his voice glacially smooth, even—perhaps even a bit hypnotic.

He was within an arm's distance of the boy.

"You want to know just how many times you screamed for me to stop?" He whispered, having stopped less than a hand's width in front of the boy's face. "You want to know how many times I fucked you until you bled? How many times you bit through your lip as you tried to contain your screams? How many times I fucked you until I could fuck no longer and had to Imperious your brother to continue on you?"

The teenager's body was trembling almost violently at the end of his tirade and Rodney looked over the boy with pride. He had done that with only his words and a few well placed lies.

He grabbed a fistful of Ron's robes and pulled him up to his own eye level.

"I don't have to tell you anything, Ronnie boy," he stated in a harsh whisper, bringing his wand up with his other hands until it was digging into one of the lad's skinny hips. "Drop your wand." A satisfying thunk was his answer.

"Hands up over your head," he instructed curtly. They went up and he tied them securely with a well placed spell. He released the hold on the front of the teen's robes and then pushed him towards the bed. A shaking, white-faced Ron followed his instructions and he soon joined him.

"You've been keeping things from me, boy," he whispered, quickly undressing his nephew. He made sure not to lose eye contact as he did so; delving into his mind with as much glee as a child tearing the wrapping paper off a gift. A moment later, his joy was doubled as his hands dove into the front of Ron's uniform trousers.

"Do you deny it?" He barked out suddenly, deriving a twisted flash of pride as the boy's body jolted.

"N-No," his nephew whispered, blue eyes becoming distant as Rodney relentlessly tore through his mental and physical treasures.

. . .

The hallway outside the decrepit classroom where Rodney and his "nephew" were currently housed was deserted, minus a very slow moving mass of dark coloured sludge. It was hidden in the shadows of the corridor, in those dark nooks and hidden tunnels that made Hogwarts so very mysterious.

Originally, the sludge had begun its existence as little more than a massive gelatinous pile of glop, no more aware of its surroundings than a pile of dead flobberworms. Roughly speaking, this state of being lasted until it first came in contact with the surface—the flesh—of its creators, the unfortunate wizarding students who had ultimately been responsible for the failure of the experiment. That was the point where it had become aware, and its awareness had grown with each flesh burning second that it had been allowed to directly touch its creators.

Afterwards, during its time in its stone prison, the sludge had learned from the magic of Hogwarts herself, becoming more conscious of itself and the "world" (Hogwarts) around it. Then at long last, some months after its inception, it had learned to move, to grow beyond its initial boundaries. In a way, it had evolved into a more or less sentient mass of mobile goo.

It was now hungry for more of those moods, more of those tantalizing feelings that it had feasted on in the beginning of its reality. It had felt the emotional anguish coming from this portion of the castle, and it had followed its senses to the corridor outside of this particular classroom.

The wards made an impression on it, but it knew that it could bypass them if it so wanted.

But it would take energy to do so, was the main thought within its gooey mind.

Thus, It decided to wait instead. Waiting didn't bother It. It had been waiting most of its awareness.

. . .

Draco and Blaise watched Harry that week as he flitted and bounced from one class to the next, his feet rarely touching the ground in all of his happiness over being wanted. They were more than pleased to have had a hand in such a momentous event. In addition, Severus had begun teaching them how to interweave protection spells into their clothing, and for extra security, their professor had taken it upon himself to spell Harry's clothing for the maximum level of safety. In turn, they were teaching the younger and more vulnerable students within their house how to do the same thing.

Late one afternoon, Harry came across Blaise and Draco as they were arguing in the common room. As it turned out, they were discussing him.

"He's just getting settled in, Draco. He's already had a lot of change, and now you want to ask him to do this as well?" Blaise was apparently arguing on his behalf, for whatever reason.

"This is familiar though, Blaise. He needs something to help get him established here!"

"How about you just ask me and I'll tell you which one is right?" Harry interjected a bit exasperatedly.

"Hey Harry," Draco began before Blaise had a chance to open his mouth. "How would you like to play Seeker for the Slytherin Quidditch team?"

Harry opened his mouth and then shut it again. He was slowly but surely learning to curb his hotheaded Gryffindor qualities, and it seemed that this was merely another opportunity to practice.

"Let me think it over, okay Draco? I need to talk to Severus about it first," he replied softly, giving the other boy a winning smile.

"Good idea Harry," Blaise retorted, smirking evilly at the blond haired boy sitting opposite them.

It would be wonderful to be up in the air again, but he wasn't sure if the good things would outnumber the bad when it came time to go head to head with his old teammates.

. . .

"Albus? I need to speak with you if you have time," Severus said via his floo late one evening, after Harry had already gone to bed. As he had suspected, Albus hadn't even changed into his evening atrocities, those vibrantly coloured things that he swore were his pajamas.

"Certainly Severus," the old man said congenially enough, waving him through after stepping out of the way.

Checking to make sure his wards were all still secure, Severus took one last look around the room before stepping through the fireplace. He stepped out into the headmaster's office with an elegance that Harry had yet to learn.

Perhaps I can still teach him. It was a heartening thought.

"What can I do for you tonight, Severus?"

"Inform me about the adoption paperwork," Severus answered, leaning back in his chair easily and crossing his legs.

"Ultimately, his guardianship is my responsibility, my boy," Albus answered seriously, his annoying twinkle curiously absent. "The paperwork to switch him from the Dursleys to you is quite simple, and has already been filed with the Ministry. I'm merely waiting on their reply that it has been finalized."

Simple? The paperwork I had to fill out took me more than four hours to complete!

"And you are not worried about any complications arising from the Ministry's side of things?"

"Amelia Bones will not allow such a thing to occur. She had taken over the handling of his paperwork herself and assures me that the adoption will be finalized before the end of the week."

"Good," Severus answered calmly, his voice steadier than his insides.

"I am sorry that I didn't believe you earlier, my boy," Albus added softly, his eyes downcast.

"It is not me that you should be apologizing to. Harry is still under the impression that you sent him to the Dursleys year after year as some sort of bizarre training."

Well, that wasn't exactly true. Harry understands the situation better than that, but I see little reason to let him know.

"Should I talk to him, Severus? Is that what you are suggesting?" Albus glanced back up at him with a fiery look. "I would talk to him, but I doubt he would be willing to listen to me."

"Perhaps you are right, but if I may Albus? I have a suggestion that may allow a chance for trust to grow between the two of you once more."

Calculating eyes made contact with his briefly, before Severus turned his head. The man's legilimency skills were often no match for his own, but there were—and had been—exceptions to that rule.

"Explain."

"As Harry's legal guardian, I would like to level charges against Vernon Dursley. I want him arrested. I want him in Azkaban," Severus said, leaning forwards as he spoke.

"A muggle in Azkaban," Albus's voice was not questioning, but merely thoughtful.

I want him tortured the same degree, if not worse, than he tortured my Harry.

"Have you given thought to how the Daily Prophet will deal with this story?" Albus asked carefully.

"Thought? Yes I have, Albus. I have given a great deal of thought to how I will deal with them, or more importantly, how I will handle Ms. Skeeter," he sneered.

"I don't think I want to know," Albus smiled.

"Perhaps not," Severus agreed. "But we do need your involvement, your support. I can't keep control over all of the facets of this situation on my own, Albus," Severus admitted.

Well, I could, but it likely wouldn't be very pretty.

"And you think that my helping will allow Harry a chance to forgive me?" Albus sounded so damned hopeful. It nearly made him sick to listen to that coming from a man like the old man before him.

"I don't know if forgive is the correct word, Albus," Severus answered slowly, watching the headmaster carefully. "You broke his trust. Completely. And truthfully Albus, I personally do not understand how you allowed yourself to be as willfully blind as you were in this situation," he added, getting to his feet and heading towards the floo as he realized just how very late it was getting.

"I don't pretend to know everything, Severus."

"No?" He felt his lip curling in distaste at the idea.

"Some believe I do, but they are wrong," Albus sounded very disconnected, his eyes focused on something only he could see. Abruptly, he started and shook himself.

"Headmaster?" Severus asked, a bit worried now.

"It is probably nothing," Albus answered, nearly in a mutter.

"Do you need my assistance?"

"I don't believe I do, my boy. Just something I need to check on before going to bed." Albus answered, still more to himself than to Severus as he moved around the edge of his desk and headed to the door.

. . .

Rodney dressed himself carefully, his body and mind nearly full to the brim with delightful sensations and experiences that would keep him sated for the next few weeks at least. His "nephew" still lay in the transfigured bed, looking utterly debauched and barely conscious after having been simultaneously mind and body raped.

He was not concerned about the boy going off and telling on him. After such an afternoon and evening as theirs, it would be a miracle if the lad could find his pants and make it back to the dormitory before sunrise.

He wasn't at the top of his game either, which is likely why he did not bother to reapply the wards as he left. That same absence of mind was probably to blame for his lack of attention to his surroundings as he stepped out in the corridor. If he had been more aware, he would have noticed the smell immediately, and he would have seen the oddly wet looking patches scattered up and down the hallway.

However, his mind only held one sensation and that was of bliss, completely and domineering bliss. It sustained him as he walked down the foul smelling hallway. It sustained him as his boots caught a bit on the ubiquitous slime, pulling a bit of it with him as he left Hogwarts and headed towards Hogsmeade. That same bit of sludge travelled with him as he apparated to his home in the countryside, and it climbed into bed with him that night as he passed out asleep.

The sludge, having evolved quite a bit from its meager beginnings in the dungeons of Hogwarts, no longer caused pain with its touch. It no longer burned and it no longer ate at the physical flesh of the body, having discovered that it preferred the silent pleasures of the mental world far more.

As Rodney Weasley slept, it pulled itself up from the floor and into his bed, gathering itself at his temple and expanding until it covered most of his crown. From there it moved into his dreams, sinking into his flesh and disappearing completely from sight.

Back at Hogwarts, the sludge still present slunk back to the cracks between the stones, hiding itself away once more as its more distant self began to feed on the horrors of the red haired man's mind.

. . .

Dumbledore could tell that something was not right long before he smelled the putrescent odor emanating from the corridor near the Gryffindor tower. He arrived too late to find traces of the sludge, but early enough that some of the offensive scent was still present.

Walking forwards carefully, he held his wand out in front of him, using all of his senses—physical and magical—to try and determine the source of the strange presence. There was an aura of darkness shading one classroom door, and he moved towards it slowly, casting a series of non-verbal protection spells as he went. He examined the doorway closely, keeping the edge of his robes and beard from touching the slowly disappearing smudges of gray.

He had never seen anything like it, but the slowly fading scent around him reminded him of death, and if nothing else, that was a good reason to be wary.

Suddenly he heard a moan from within the classroom. Startled, he looked up from his study of the leftover traces of the sludge, and peered inside. Was that a shock of bright red hair that he spied?

"Expurgo," he cast on the doorway, watching carefully as the final traces of the dark presence disappeared from sight. He waited until the area was clear before stepping through into the room itself.

His eyes went wide as he took in the horrifying sight of the youngest Weasley boy lying prone on the overly decadent bed. Breaking out of his stupor, he moved quickly to the fifth year's side and began running scans. Fawkes appeared seconds later and he redirected his familiar to the infirmary to summon Poppy.

It was only after she had arrived and they had gotten him safely back to the infirmary that Dumbledore truly allowed himself to process the sights that he had seen.

Blood on the white sheets, some patches already dark, but others still bright. Finger shaped bruises on the lad's skinny white hips, more bruising on his neck and chest; blood on his lower lip highlighted with several purpling teeth shaped marks; fingernail scratches imbedded in his chest and back, swollen with blood. It was too much to think of. He found himself falling into the chair Poppy had conveniently put out for him, his mind reeling as it continued to automatically catalogue the extent of horrors that were present on far too young flesh.

Rape, this was rape, his subconscious kept repeating over and over in his mind. This was rape like what Hermione Granger experienced, like what Colin Creevey experienced, and most importantly, like

what Harry Potter experienced. All students in my school, all students in my school!

"Father . . ." a slurred voice broke through his thoughts, breaking the silence of Poppy's hurried administrations.

"Was that Mr. Weasley?" Albus looked up, shock lining his eyes and forehead.

"Father, please," Ron spoke again, shifting away from Poppy's hands ever so slightly.

"He can't possibly be speaking of—?" Albus looked at Poppy, trying to will her not to say it. This could not be happening. This simply was not happening!

"Percy, stop," Ron trailed off, slumping further down as his brief bout with semi-consciousness came to an end.

"It could just be a nightmare," Poppy said bravely, but Albus could hear the tremor in her voice.

"Run the tests," he instructed, pulling himself to his feet, eyes glinting hard in the lights of the infirmary. His children had been hurt. It had taken him some time, but he finally understood what it meant to be hurt like this.

"You don't think that Arthur could have done this, do you Albus?" Poppy's eyes were searching as she glanced at his face.

"I don't know, Poppy," he shook his head unbelievably. The world had shifted on its axis around him and he felt as though he had been left to make sense of it all.

"Do the tests, Poppy," he said in a slightly gentler tone. "We'll make sense of this together. For now, I must go and speak with Minerva."

Poppy pinched her lips together and nodded. It was obvious that she wanted to say more on this topic, but she managed to keep it to herself.

. . .

Harry awoke the next morning with a smile on his lips. It had been that way all week. Hopefully it would last into the next, but he knew it probably wouldn't. As he stepped out into the sitting room of his guardian, it occurred to him that he had forgotten to bring up the subject of Quidditch with Severus. Upon seeing the man sitting at the table drinking a cup of tea, he took a deep steadying breath and moved across the room to take a seat next to him.

"Good morning sir—Severus, I mean," he said, smiling a bit at his mistake.

"Sir Severus?" The dark haired man next to him asked with a raised eyebrow. "I rather like the sound of that," he said, putting a hand to his heart with a dramatic sigh. "Have I just been knighted? Should I go and get my hair done?"

Harry nearly choked as he tried to keep his laughter contained. The whole conversation was so—so not Severus!

"Geez, Dad!" He managed to bite out embarrassedly around his giggles. Suddenly his brain caught up with his mouth and he froze completely still, staring at Severus with wide frightened eyes.

What did I just do?

"Oh f—hell, sir. I'm s-sorry. I didn't—!" He stammered out weakly, his heart pounding loudly in his ears. He desperately found himself wishing for a time turner as Severus continued to stare calmly back at him, unspeaking.

Then, out of nowhere, he felt his guardian's warmer hands grasp his own icy cold ones, turning him into the man's chest ever so slightly. Severus's cheek on his head and an arm around his shoulders held him there, keeping his trembles at bay.

"If I am allowed to call you 'Son,' then trust me that you are most certainly allowed to call me 'Dad,'" Severus's words rumbled through him, somehow counteracting his uncontrolled trembling. Relief flowed quite suddenly through him, and he very nearly slumped forwards, colliding gently with his guardian's chest.

Chapter 21 – Understanding the Implications

Arthur Weasley was having breakfast with his wife the next morning when the call came through the floo.

"Arthur?" Kingsley's face appeared in the flames. "Might I come through?"

"Certainly," Arthur answered with the sort of smile one gives in the early morning hours.

"Care for a cup of tea, Kingsley?" Molly asked after he appeared in their sitting room.

"I can't Molly. I have rather urgent Ministry business to discuss with Arthur," Kingsley answered apologetically.

"It's not You-Know-Who, is it Kingsley?" She quickly asked, her forehead creasing in worry.

"Not as far as I can tell," Kingsley answered, giving her a charming grin that disappeared as soon as she left the room.

"What's this about, Kingsley?" Arthur asked, concerned.

"There's some bad business going on," the auror explained; his face unusually dour.

"What kind and what do I have to do with it?"

"I need to know where you were last evening between the hours of six and midnight."

"What's going on Kingsley?" Arthur looked hard at the man opposite him.

"Just answer the question, Arthur," Kingsley said with an equally critical look.

"Six to eleven I was at my office, and then I was here by midnight for sure, maybe a few minutes before," he answered, his voice wavering a bit.

"Was anyone there with you?"

"Perkins left about eight," Arthur answered, his voice dropping to a whisper as he realized the implications of his statement.

"And no one else was there after that?"

"No."

"I'm sorry Arthur, but I'm going to have to ask you come along to the Ministry with me," Kingsley finally said with a sigh.

"Then at least tell me what is going on?"

"Arthur, you know I can't," Kingsley answered apologetically.

"What should I tell Molly?" Arthur's eyes were wide, his lips nearly white from trying to keep control of himself.

"Tell her that we need you at the Ministry. There has been an incident at Hogwarts, and we believe that you may be our best bet for clearing up any lasting confusion."

. . .

Rodney slept badly. Things that he hadn't thought about in years came up in his dreams that night, things that he very much would have preferred to have left buried firmly in the past where they belonged.

He had been standing in a room full of people, most of which whom had been dead for some time; the little girl who had laughed at him in his first ever charms glass, half her face rotted off with one bony finger pointed out at him; morphing slowly into an image of his first wife staring dolefully at him, a hole in her stomach showing the remains of her organs; numerous Weasley cousins, red hair and all, leering cruelly at him, cackling madly in his ears.

"You're the worst Weasley that ever was!" They used to shout at him before he had ever set foot in Hogwarts.

He awoke with tears in his eyes for the first time in a long time, and sat up quickly, cradling his pounding head in his hands.

"They were wrong, they were wrong," he whispered vehemently to himself, arguing against the cocky memories still shouting nauseatingly loud in his head.

He remembered the fervor to which he had applied himself while learning how to make the poison that would eventually eat out his dear wife's innards. It had been worth the trouble of constantly brewing the lust potion which he had ensnared her with, just to be able to have the chance to laugh at her when she began vomiting blood onto her clothes.

That certainly had taught her to laugh at him for stuttering through his first class.

Not that she had remembered that. In fact, by the end, she hadn't remembered much of anything, which was just fine with him.

An image of Narcissa Black floated past his mind's eye and he sighed remorsefully. Oh how he had envied his Black cousins! The first time he had ever met them, he had known, he had finally understood what it was like to be surrounded by one's family.

Of course, the rest of his family had ignored them; going on with their business as if the other side of the family wasn't even in the room. Who were the snobby ones then? The rich Black cousins? Or the stuck-up know-it-all Weasleys?

It certainly hadn't been his last interaction with that side of the family. He had sought them out a time or two each year during his Hogwarts days, making connections, learning, watching, seeing how they interacted, how they coexisted.

He remembered being approached by a very young Lucius Malfoy, the boy couldn't have been any more than a third year really, and being asked why he wasn't a Snake like them? And the sound of his cousin Bellatrix's laughter in response, the girl had always been insane as far as he was concerned.

With another sigh, he finally stood up and began getting ready for the day. Reminiscing was all well and good, but he had things to do that day, and he didn't have time for it. Idly he scratched at his head,

never noticing the strange dark glow that briefly appeared while he did so.

. . .

"Severus? Sir?" Harry bounced into their quarters that night, nearly smashing headfirst into the older man in his excitement.

"Harry? Is there something wrong?" Severus asked, catching the boy gently and leading him to sit down at the sofa.

"Is it true sir? Is it true that he, that—," he babbled on until he was shushed by one of Severus's long fingers being laid across his lips.

"Is what true?"

"I heard Ron Weasley was attacked," he answered, trying to keep himself under control.

"It is indeed true," his father answered solemnly.

"I'm glad," he spat vehemently, crossing his arms in front of his body defensively.

"It would not do to let anyone else see you so pleased about his being attacked, son," Severus answered carefully, stroking his hair lightly with the back of his fingers.

"I'm not stupid, sir. I mean, dad," he corrected himself with a blush, ducking his head as he did.

"I told you, Harry. You needn't call me 'dad' if you do not wish to," Severus told him gently.

"But I want to call you dad. I've never been able to say that to anyone before now," he interrupted, reaching out and grasping the man's hand tightly.

Severus gave him a small pleased smile and then continued.

"As to the matter of your intelligence, I only have one thing to say: Of course you are not stupid. I merely wished to reemphasize the importance of not letting yourself slip up in such a high pressure

time. In addition, I should hope that you are still moving around the castle in a group with your year mates," he also advised. "Whoever attacked the Weasley boy could easily still be out there. I would be most displeased to learn that you have been traveling alone, son."

"Okay dad," Harry softly with another blush.

. . .

Rita Skeeter apparated home the next evening with only one idea in mind, getting in bed and staying there until someone made her get up again. She knew something was going on, there had been a great deal of activity at the Ministry that day, but no one seemed willing to say anything about it—well, at least not anything that she could print without being arrested for it. For whatever reason, aurors tended to get a touch snippy when they were misquoted.

"Their loss," she laughed to herself as she made her way through her house tiredly.

She stopped by the kitchen and got herself a glass of wine, and then slowly weaved her way into her sitting room, turning lights on as she went. She knew that a house elf could have gladly done all that for her and more, but the damn little blighters made her crazy, and she'd just as soon live on her own than have to deal with them.

Besides, being a naturally paranoid woman, she preferred to keep her secrets to herself, and whoever thought house elves were loyal clearly had never seen one tortured with dark magic. That had been one story she had just been thankful to escape with her life, to hell with writing it down.

"Drinking again Rita?" The unexpected voice nearly made her drop her wine glass.

"How did you get in?" She demanded in a scathing voice.

The figure in the dark corner moved forwards, and she narrowed her eyes as she took in his unpleasant expression.

"You really ought to have your floo looked at, dear Rita," he sneered, dropping into her favorite armchair with a graceful ease that most women would have killed for the chance to master.

"Get out of my house, Snape," she warned with a hiss, putting her wine down in exchange for her wand.

The dark haired sallow faced man looked casually back up at her, hands spread in a gesture of would-be openness.

"Why should I leave, Rita? I've been waiting for you," he smiled and the image caused chills to go down her back. His dark yellowed teeth gleamed cruelly in the half-lit room, making her wonder exactly what sorts of snacks he normally dined on to cause such an unpleasant visual effect.

"You are trespassing, Snape. I should wonder if your headmaster knows where you are right now. I'm sure he would be most displeased to learn that his pet Death Eater has been wandering off during school hours," she tutted, throwing herself almost violently onto the settee opposite him.

It chilled her further when he did not rise to her baiting, his smile widening instead, as he took in her discomfort.

"I should wonder about the same thing dear Rita," Snape said coolly. "I recently heard an interesting rumour regarding your supposed animagus status," his smile twisted into a cruel sneer.

"Why Severus, I didn't know you cared," she glared. "As it happens, I am registered with the Ministry."

"Yes yes, so you're registered now," he waved his hand dismissively. "I do believe that Albus would still be interested to know that you were on Hogwarts grounds after he banned your presence back last spring."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she quickly retorted.

"Of course not, dear Rita," Snape answered. "However, if you want me to keep everyone else from knowing, I suggest you stop your posturing and listen to me," he warned.

She glared at him for a moment, and then abruptly changed gears.

"Surely you are not here to deliver me a story, dear Severus?" She gave him a small smirk. "Who are you playing lapdog for today?"

She took delight in the small twitch her words caused in his jaw, hardly noticeable to anyone other than someone with an eye trained for such revealing details.

"I serve no one, Rita," Snape said, his face glacially smooth once more, the small tell in his jaw having completely vanished.

"No, I suppose that you don't," she admitted grudgingly after more uncomfortable silence.

"Are you quite finished wasting our time?" He didn't wait for her answer. "I have information that I believe you will appreciate."

"Really," she answered demurely, raising an eyebrow and pulling out a regular quill. She knew that Snape would just as likely blast her Quick Quotes Quill to pieces, should she try to employ it in their conversation. That was fine. There was more than one way to skin a shrivelfig, after all.

"Does it have something to do with the higher than usual level of activity at the Ministry today?"

"Really, Rita," Snape cocked his head. "And here I was, thinking the only mindless talkers were Hufflepuffs."

"Oh Severus, with your experience, I would have thought you'd know that eventually, everyone talks," she shot back, not willing to respond to his jibe to her house affiliation.

"And you would know that, wouldn't you," his smile was crueler than before.

"You and everyone else who was there is under oath—."

"There are ways around oaths," he stated softly, leaning forwards in his chair. "And should you want to continue this idiotic trip down memory lane, I'm sure I could find a way around that one, if only for the joy of shutting you up." Snape's face lacked anything resembling joy, but that was not the reason she took him at his word.

"Decided to cooperate?"

For now, she thought but didn't say out loud.

Clearly he decided to take her silence as an acceptable answer, for he replied with a deeply voiced, "Good. Now you shall listen to me, and listen well, because I certainly do not feel like repeating myself."

. . .

"Four Gryffindors," Minerva spat back at Albus Dumbledore after he had finished telling her about Ron Weasley. "Four Gryffindors attacked and raped," she hissed at him, sounding very catlike in her angry defense of her students.

"Well, technically three, my dear," he answered weakly, trying to at least keep his Transfigurations professor from leveling the entire room with her anger. "Harry—."

With a shriek, she stood up and grabbed him by the front of his robes. At the same time, every book in her quarters flew across the room, several smacking Dumbledore, but completely missing her irate form.

Clearly I should have left Harry out of the conversation, he thought ruefully.

"Should that make me feel better Albus? Does it make you feel better? Is that how you sleep at night, knowing that at least Harry was not harmed here on this campus?"

"It does not, Minerva. Surely you of all people would know that—," he tried, being interrupted once more.

"Surely I know that, Albus? For years you force Harry to live with those despicable muggles, and surely I know that you care for him? Two of the students attacked were muggle borns, Albus. Does that make this situation somehow better? At least they were not all purebloods? Does that make it better? DOES IT ALBUS?" She shouted, the strength of her angry magic throwing him hard into the stone wall behind him.

"Calm yourself, my dear!" He ordered in a shout, but it was to no avail. She was far too gone to respond to anyone's words—particularly his. "I am not the one to whom you should be directing all of your fury!"

"No? I should just direct it all to the unknown assailant? The unknown perpetrator of these hideous crimes? The one that you have done nothing to find?" She answered, still hissing, her hand wrapped in the front of his robes.

"That is untrue!"

"Is it? What have you done to make this insanity end? Hm, Albus? What have you done?" She growled, finally releasing his robes and going back to pacing the room.

"I have helped procure a way to keep Harry safe, Minerva!" He shouted back in exasperation.

"This better not be another one of your harebrained schemes, Albus. I have had just about enough of them! And that does nothing to address the issues of my other lions!"

"Trust me, my dear, it is not. If we could sit?" He tried to smile gracefully at her.

"Fine. We can sit," Minerva growled, taking a seat, her glare not diminishing one iota. "Now talk," she demanded.

. . .

"Do you understand the situation now, Rita?" Snape asked her. "If you feel like writing anymore lies about my son," his eyes glinting dangerously, "you will be hearing directly from me. Do I make myself clear?"

At least there is a linear connection between his earlier behavior and what he just told me, she observed. Clearly the boy means a great deal to him.

That was potentially very intriguing. Warning or not, she endeavored to dig a bit deeper into that puzzle.

"Clear as ice," she confirmed, playing her expected part.

In a flash, Snape was on his feet, and before she knew it, his wand was pressed painfully against her throat.

"Do not lie to me," he hissed malevolently. "I can see the deception in your eyes. As you are far too fond of bringing up, do not forget whose company I have kept, Rita. I could kill you here and no one would ever find out what happened to you. Do you understand?" He growled.

She could practically feel the dark magic flowing off of him as he spoke, and couldn't help but be somewhat mesmerized by it.

"Fine. Understood," she answered in clipped tones. "I won't write a single naughty word about your precious boy," she smiled evilly. "But that's not the only reason you're here, is it?"

She felt a final jab against her throat from his wand, and then watched carefully as it disappeared without a trace back inside the folds of his black teaching robes.

"Very perceptive," he sneered, making it obvious that he thought she was anything but. "I do happen to know something about what everyone is striving so hard to keep secret from you and the rest of the public," he leaned back and folded his hands over his knee.

She sensed a deal. So she asked the necessary question, "What do you want from me?"

"Just your continued silence," he said grimly. "There is something happening, and yes, the Ministry is involved, at least somewhat."

"I'm interested," she replied in a calm voice, even though her innards were fluttering madly.

"It's dark. It's sordid, Rita. You and all of your nasty little readers will likely get off on it," his non-verbal behaviors confirmed for her that he was telling the truth.

It was safe to say that her interest was more than piqued.

"And?"

"I can tell you one juicy hint Rita, but," he leaned forwards, eyes deathly in their continued gaze upon her face. "Should you ever spread anymore tales of this previous term's magnitude about me or my son, I swear by Merlin's grave that I will find a way to implicate you in all of it too."

"Agreed," she answered more calmly. She always had an easier time relaxing after her negotiators laid all of their cards on the table.

"Go back to your original source, Rita. Young Mr. Weasley is at the center of everything."

This time, it was her eyes that gleamed as she pondered the implications of his statement. With that in mind, she barely noticed when he took his leave of her.

...

Severus Snape felt positively slimy after negotiating his deal with Rita Skeeter. True, Ronald Weasley did seem to be at the heart of the current mess going on within the walls of Hogwarts, if the words of his son and the youngest Creevey boy were anything at all to go by, but that did not mean that he felt no remorse about the entire ghastly affair.

He wanted the truth to come out about what the boy and his brother had been up to over the past year or more—he very much suspected the latter—but it was also far too likely that the rest of the family would be dragged down as well.

His thoughts returned to Miss Granger and the Creevey brothers. True, whatever trouble the Weasleys were bound to find themselves in was likely to be unpleasant at the very least, but could it really compare to how much Granger and Creevey had suffered in the past term?

Did one really balance out the other?

How many lives would be ruined before justice was served?

On the other hand, what really was going on at the Weasley household that had allowed for the creations of Ron and Percy?

Perhaps it was all worthwhile, if only to shine light on the darkness that seemed to be growing within that family. Who knew how many others had been poisoned by the evil that had been allowed to continue go unchecked for so long?

"Daddy?" Harry's hesitant voice interrupted his dark brooding and he looked up sharply at the sound.

"I'm s-sorry, I'll come back," his son's face had paled dramatically at his unhappy countenance.

"Harry," he called out softly, forcefully making himself relax.

"Sir?"

"Come back here," he instructed, patting the spot beside him lightly.

"Are you okay?" His son asked in a small voice.

"I am better now," he responded gently, touching his son's wild mane of hair lightly with his fingertips.

Harry blushed at his words and he put an arm around the small teen, pulling him into rest next to his side comfortably.

"Have you brushed your teeth?"

"Yes sir, I mean dad," his son answered shyly, burying his face in his shoulder embarrassedly.

"And you will remember to do your evening meditations?" Severus had begun teaching him the basics of Occlumency, adding onto the natural skills his son seemed to have inadvertently developed over the previous summer.

"Yes dad," Harry replied obediently.

"Homework done?"

Harry nodded energetically, even as he leaned more languidly into Severus.

"Dad?"

"Yes son?" Severus enjoyed saying that word more than he would have ever thought possible.

"Draco wants me to play Seeker for the Slytherin Quidditch team."

Good lad.

"What do you want to do?" He asked carefully.

"I-I want to. I miss it."

"But?"

"My old team, I mean, won't they be angry?"

"They were already angry, if I remember correctly," Severus pointed out calmly.

"Won't it just be worse?"

Severus gave a silent sigh and then physically moved his son around to look him in the face.

"Perhaps it will," he started. "But now you will have the support of all of the Slytherins there. You will have your friends too."

"And you? Will you come watch too?" Bright green eyes stared up at him, reminding him strongly of another such pair.

"Of course I will. Clearly I will likely have to tell everyone else that I am there to support my Slytherins, but they will all know that I'm truly there to watch my wonderful son doing what he loves best."

"Dad," Harry blushed and pressed his face against Severus's chest again. "Just don't say that in front of anyone else, 'kay?" His voice was muffled, but he could still hear the pleased sound in his son's voice regardless.

"As you wish," Severus answered with his just-for-Harry grin.

Chapter 22 – Finding a Scapegoat

A/N- Whenever I think of Rita Skeeter, this is the quote that comes to mind:

From Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (J.K. Rowling's):

"You horrible woman," she said, through gritted teeth, "you don't care, do you, anything for a story, and anyone will do, won't they? Even Ludo Bagman -"

"Sit down, you silly little girl, and don't talk about things you don't understand," said Rita Skeeter coldly, her eyes hardening as they fell on Hermione. "I know things about Ludo Bagman that would make your hair curl... not that it needs it -" she added, eyeing Hermione's bushy hair.

. . .

Rita Skeeter, as careful as she had always been, had still not been completely out of danger from those less than savory characters she investigated. In fact, there were a few times that she would have rather just forgotten altogether, and she might have been able to get away with it if not for people like Severus Snape.

His visit, even with the intriguing tidbits he had given her, had put her into a vile mood as those memories vied for attention within her mind.

So it was with a vicious edge to her voice that she began flooring her various contacts within the ministry, burning through the favors people owed her with a vengeance. She took great pleasure in watching the spineless ministry worms cower as they answered her questions.

"You know that I can't say anything, Rita," one such worm trembled through her interrogation of him.

"Of course not, Carl," she sneered, her dark eyes sharp as they took in his sweating brow and ruddy cheeks. "However, I feel that I should remind you that I am not under the same sort of compulsion, Carl. Do tell me, how is your wife?" Rita smiled cruelly as the man's face paled dramatically.

"What does she h-have to do with this?" Carl asked, trying to show her a brave face, but failing miserably.

"Oh nothing, nothing really, minus those NEWT level exams that she cheated on while at Hogwarts. That's not really that important, right?" The smile she gave this time was victorious.

"That! That is a baseless accusation!" The man spluttered indignantly, his face still as pale as a certain potion's master whom she was purposefully not thinking of.

"Don't you remember, Carl? Or has your memory really gotten that poor? I do wish you'd aim those obliviations of yours a little better." She thought she did simpering sweet quite well when she needed to.

"What did you say you wanted to know?" He finally asked her, a defeated look on his face.

"What do you know about Ronald Weasley?" She leaned forwards with a predatory glint in her eye.

. . .

What Professor Snape previously revealed to Ginny Weasley about her brother, Percy in Chapter 16:

"From what I have surmised, he seems to have had an unusual amount of interest in the younger girls," he said pointedly, looking on calmly as the spots of pink in the girl's cheeks briefly flared a brighter red.

He didn't enjoy frightening the child, but given the delicate nature of the topic, he couldn't just very well ask her whether or not her brother had been molesting her. He hoped that with the addition of potential other innocents into the equation, she might be prompted to say something more about her own experience.

. . .

"P-P-Professor Snape?"

Severus looked up from the papers he was grading and discovered Ginny Weasley standing in his office doorway.

"Miss Weasley," he stated formally, his mind awlirl over the possible reasons she was visiting him.

"May I speak to you privately, sir?"

"Please," he answered graciously, offering her a seat and then closing the door with a swish of his wand.

"I'm—I'm sorry that I didn't come back and speak to you sooner, sir," she said, voice wavering slightly.

"Are you quite all right, Miss Weasley?" Severus asked gently, getting to his feet and going around the desk to sit next to the child.

Lip trembling now, the girl looked up at him and quickly shook her head, "no."

"I—I can't, I mean, I remember what you told me about Percy, sir. And I—And I," she bit her lower lip and looked away from him, blinking hard. He watched as her hands clenched up tightly in her lap, and felt the unusual urge to put his arm around her shoulders.

"I didn't tell you sir, last time, but—but I do have—," she swallowed and nearly lost her control altogether.

"Child?" He asked, offering her his handkerchief in place of her own sodden one.

She took it and then put her hand to her mouth; her shoulders shaking violently as she tried to find a way to say what she clearly had a need to say.

"I—I," she started again, bowing her head and closing her eyes painfully tight. "I have inf—formation th—that y—y—you may—that you might find help—p—pful."

It must have been all the time he had spent around Harry. The boy had clearly softened him up. For the next thing he knew, he had Ginny Weasley in his arms, holding her up as she wept silently into his chest.

"I hate him, I hate him!" Were the only words he could decipher around her sobs.

"He hurt you." It wasn't a question. Even if he had not already had some inkling of what was going on, the child's behavior left little room for doubt.

"How c—could he do it, sir?" She finally looked up, her eyes wet and glistening, stabbing at his heart painfully.

"I wish I had an answer," he said slowly, shaking his head back and forth. "Regardless of what has happened, it is important to realize that it is not your fault. You did nothing to provoke him, or Merlin forbid, tempt him. He is family, and as family, his actions have hurt you grievously, making this all the harder to rationalize, let alone understand."

. . .

"Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore's even and measured voice broke into his thoughts, making Ron Weasley jerk and turn in his bed towards the old man.

"Sir," he answered as calmly as he could, his anger simmering deep in his gut.

"I need to know what you can tell us about the night you were attacked," he said, stepping to the side to reveal an anxious looking McGonagall behind him.

"I—," he looked away and gritted his teeth as a fresh wave of fury blew through his body. His being attacked—as the headmaster had so graciously put it—hadn't been part of his plans. He didn't want his uncle here; he didn't want his uncle controlling every aspect of his life; he just wanted to forget the whole thing had ever happened.

"I don't remember," Ron stated, staring at a point on the wall somewhere over Dumbledore's left shoulder.

"Minerva, would you give us a few moments alone?" Dumbledore softly asked his head of house.

"Of course," she answered stiffly, walking out of his curtained off area. He felt the telltale signs of a privacy ward going up around them and didn't know whether he wanted to scream or laugh.

"I can tell that you are lying to me, child. Trust me when I tell you that there is no reason for it," the old man spoke to him in what Ron was sure was supposed to be a soothing voice.

"Because you'll protect me?" Ron answered with a bitter laugh.

"I will," Dumbledore looked at him in concern.

"I don't want your fucking help," he answered coldly, digging his nails into his palm in an attempt to rein in his overwhelming emotions. "I just want you to leave me alone and never talk about this again," he finished with a growl, throwing the blanket off and getting gingerly to his feet. "Where are my clothes?"

"They were covered in your blood," Dumbledore told him in a soft voice, seating himself on the edge of his bed and gazing at him sadly.

"Too bad they weren't covered in Potter's blood, yeah? You could have put them up for sale," Ron bit back harshly.

"Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore sounded disapproving, but he couldn't bring himself to care. "I think that you should be aware that your father has been taken in by the aurors for questioning."

He froze in his steps and then relaxed as he realized who Dumbledore was referring to.

"Oh, goody for Arthur," he smiled, feeling sick to his stomach.

"I am concerned with your behavior, Mr. Weasley. Poppy is of the opinion that you should be transferred to St. Mungos, and I am beginning to think that I agree with her."

He wasn't looking at the old man, but could feel those damned blue eyes burning twin holes in his backside.

"Nothing happened," he finally turned around, smiling benignly at the old bastard. "This was just a big misunderstanding."

"I wasn't aware that rape could be considered consensual, Mr. Weasley," blue eyes still staring at him, and he made a conscious effort not to meet them with his own.

"I'm not pressing any charges," he answered, finding his wand in the side table and transfiguring his pajamas into real clothes. He silently thanked Merlin that he had finally been able to get a wand that fit him.

"You are a minor, Mr. Weasley. The charges are not yours to press." Dumbledore was infinitely calm, annoying him just that much more.

"And nothing happened," he said, repeating himself with a mild shrug.

"Blood happened, Mr. Weasley."

So fucking calm.

"Semen happened as well, Mr. Weasley. The initial tests show that it came from a male member of your family."

Fucking calm.

"Accidental magic perhaps. I was sleepwalking, and—." He knew he was being ridiculous. There was no way the old man would ever drop this.

"Your rectum was torn. You were disoriented. Your body was littered with cuts, bites and bruises."

Fuck him! As if I need to be reminded!

"Did anyone ever tell you about the time that I walked down to Hogsmeade while asleep? Stranger things have happened," he shrugged, stepping farther away from the bed.

"He cannot hurt you here," Dumbledore's voice was hushed, his tone imploring.

Minus the fact that he already did? Oh, okay. Ron knew that the old man likely wanted him to say exactly that, just to force him to give up his charade.

"Who?" He asked calmly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"The man who raped you, my boy."

Silence.

"Right. Okay then, I'm going back to my dorm room," he said brightly, clapping his hands together. He turned to leave the enclosed space, but felt the old man's hand on his shoulder, a surprisingly strong grip holding him in place.

"Let go of me," Ron's fury was bubbling up again, threatening to push out of his careful control and into the air around them.

"What are you hiding, child?" The man sounded so fucking sincere.

Ron hated him for it.

Why couldn't he have cared earlier than now? Why was it only Harry bloody Potter that ever got anyone's fucking concern?

"Preliminary tests show that it was a close family member. Was it one of your brothers? I can't help you unless you tell me," Dumbledore said, annoying him even more by repeating most of his words from before.

Did the man really think he was that stupid?

"Are we done here? I need to visit the owlery before curfew," he finally said, glancing at Dumbledore with a murderous feel in his heart. Perhaps the man felt the sentiment in his gaze, because shortly after, he felt those damnable fingers release their hold on him.

Seeing that the man had nothing left to keep him there with, Ron sneered and then stalked fearsomely out of the infirmary. He had a letter to write.

. . .

"Percy Weasley?"

Percy looked up from his paperwork into the stern face of Kingsley Shacklebolt, who was flanked by Mad-Eye Moody and another auror that he didn't know.

"Yes?"

"Stand up." Kingsley's voice was rough and they all had their wands out. Percy could feel eyes on him from the other Ministry workers present. He had no choice but to stand.

"Might I ask what this is all about?"

"You can ask, boy," Moody spat, glowering at him with a sneer that threatened to break apart what was left of his face.

"I don't want any trouble," he said, speaking very calmly as he put his wand down on the desk in front of him.

"Too late for that," Kingsley told him in a very quiet voice, grabbing him by the shoulder tightly and turning him around to lock handcuffs around his wrists tightly. Percy knew that they were warded against transformations and average levels of wandless magic. No one but an extremely powerful wizard could break free, and even that was only a theory.

Needless to say, the theory was not going to be put to the test by him.

. . .

Uncle –

For some reason, Dumbledore seems to think that a close family member raped me. I told him that his accusation was hogwash, but he told me that my being a minor means that the matter is out of my hands.

They're thinking about sending me to St. Mungo's.

Thought you should know.

R.B.W.

As much as Ronald wanted his uncle to pay for what he had done to him, not just recently but throughout the entirety of his life, he also didn't want the possibility of seeing the entire situation turn into a public debacle.

He wanted his vengeance to be on his own terms. He wanted to be able to hold his revenge in his hands, watching patiently as his uncle's life slowly slipped away.

. . .

Only a few hours later, he received the following:

Ronald –

Percy has been arrested for assaulting an unnamed minor. It seems that his crimes have finally been brought to light. There is no reason to fear any kind of retribution now.

If you need legal assistance, I will finance it.

Rodney Weasley

His uncle's name was signed in a flourish, and the letter had been sealed with the official Weasley coat of arms.

It seemed that Percy was going to be their scapegoat. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. On one hand, Percy was his brother—his real brother, not a half like the rest of his siblings. On the other hand, Percy had helped his "uncle" to hurt him on more than one occasion, involuntarily as well as voluntarily.

Unsurprisingly, Ron didn't get much sleep that night.

. . .

"Severus," Dumbledore's face looked older than he remembered.

"Headmaster," Severus stated formally as he took a seat opposite the man's desk.

"Percy has been arrested."

"Good," Severus answered with a curl of his lips. That bastard, he thought angrily, his mind going automatically to the girl who had cried herself to sleep in his arms only the day before.

"I—."

Severus watched in interest as his employer stopped and wiped a hand over his face in an uncharacteristic show of weariness.

"I haven't contacted Molly yet about Miss Weasley."

Severus thought about that. With Percy in custody and Arthur being held for "questioning" (he knew better than most what that was all about), perhaps it was better to keep the rest of this silent, at least for now.

In the back of his mind though, there was small voice that kept insistently reminding him that Rita Skeeter was under no such compulsion. It was only a matter of time before their entire quandary became moot.

Of course, he did not mention any of that to Albus.

"Perhaps that is a prudent decision on your part," he offered instead, speaking his words cautiously.

"I am sickened by what has been revealed this year, Severus," Albus said, looking pained.

And I am not?

"Has Ronald told you any more of the identity of his attacker?" He used the boy's name for clarity's sake, thinking that there were far too many "Mr. Weasley's" involved thus far.

"No," Albus's answer was short, his face suddenly troubled.

"What is it?"

"He is denying that he was attacked."

Interesting. Of course he had his own suspicions about Ronald Weasley—more than suspicions really, with what Dennis had said in some of their informal conversations with Harry, but nothing that would hold up legally.

"He is a boy, Albus. Male victims," he drummed his fingers on the armrest of the chair, "rarely come forwards after being attacked. In fact, there are many who believe that males cannot be raped."

"That is preposterous!" Albus thundered, stilling his fingers immediately with the abrupt change in tone.

"But true," he countered softly, briefly glancing up into Dumbledore's worried eyes.

"What is going on in that family, my boy?" Albus's answered, sounding strained and tired.

He didn't answer. It didn't seem to be a question that actually could be answered, and certainly not by either of them.

"I need a favor from you, Severus."

"Regarding?" He asked warily.

"Miss Granger's memories regarding her attacker," was Dumbledore's somber reply.

Ah.

"Do you believe that they were assaulted by the same person?"

"I'm not yet sure what I believe, my boy."

"What of the physical evidence from Weasley's rapist?"

"Poppy's results—," Albus started, only to be waved off by an irritated Severus.

"Have you not yet had them tested via revealing potion?"

"I had thought that the lad would tell me," Albus admitted quietly, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

Severus ran a hand over the side of his head in frustration. Gryffindors. Bloody trusting arseholes, he thought angrily.

"And I suppose that you don't have any on hand either," he growled out, quickly making his way to his feet.

"It's not been needed since—," Albus paused, blue eyes catching his own dark ones pointedly.

Severus raised his eyes to the ceiling and made himself count to ten, and then he did it again in Latin, to ensure that he was not about to hex the man before him.

When he was positive that he had himself back under control, he looked back down and stared coldly at Albus.

"I seem to remember it not being used then either," he answered deeply, his voice nearly a growl.

"Now Severus," Albus began.

"Do not 'Now Severus' me!" He hissed, turning his back on the old man and making his way to the door.

"I'll brew your bloody potion for you, old man, but you had better make sure that it is actually used this time."

With that, he swirled his robes around himself dramatically and left the man's office with a slam of the door behind him.

. . .

Back in quarters, Severus paced back and forth; part of his mind was focused on tallying up the list of ingredients needed for the Revelio potion, but the rest of his thoughts were lost in the past, remembering the attack that had happened to one of his housemates during his fourth year.

"Dad?"

The sound of his son's voice made him stutter to a stop, his eyes snapping up to meet green eyes staring in concern at him from the opposite side of the room. Harry was dressed in his Quidditch gear and his cheeks were flushed, meaning he had just come back from practice.

"What's happened?"

"Change clothes and meet me in my private lab," he answered instead, needing a chance to calm himself down before explaining the situation.

"Okay," Harry answered carefully, nodding at him. The boy's face was worried, but at least he didn't seem to be afraid of Severus.

Some fifteen minutes later, they met back up in his lab, where Severus had already begun getting out the necessary ingredients. There was no time to waste, as the potion would require most of the next week to develop—yet another reason for his anger against Dumbledore.

"I may need your help with this," he stated softly as his freshly washed, fifteen year-old child came up beside him.

"What is it?"

"The Revelio potion," was his simple answer.

"I've never heard of that one," Harry said, looking befuddled.

"Likely you have not," he said slowly, thinking of how he wanted to put his next words.

"Does it have something to do with who attacked Ron?"

Severus raised an appreciative eyebrow at his son.

"Dad, I wanted to tell you something. I thought about the conversation we had the other day, and I'm sorry that I was so glad that he had been attacked."

"Harry—," Severus started to say, only to be cut off with a very Snape-like look from his son.

"No, Dad. I need to say this. I don't think sexual assault can ever be considered a good thing, and I'm sorry if it came out like that. I just wanted him to hurt for everything he's done. Dennis is convinced that he hurt Colin, and I bet he's the one who hurt Hermione."

"Are you done now? May I speak?"

"If you want," his son said, flashing him a smile.

"Good, because you were in danger of sounding like a Gryffindor had you continued on any longer."

"Can't have that," Harry answered, looking up at him in askance.

"Child," he said softly, turning and laying his larger hand on Harry's still much thinner shoulder. "It is not a bad thing to be angry about something unjust. And in some cases, violence is necessary in order to keep the ones you love safe. The important thing is not to let your vengeance become intertwined in the reasons for your actions. Do you understand?"

Harry nodded slowly, staring at him with a new appreciation in his eyes.

He nodded back and then turned back to the preparations for the potion at hand.

"The Revelio potion is an advanced potion that has not ever—so far as I am aware—been taught to any student while at Hogwarts," he said, feeling himself slipping into his instructor mode.

"Is it dangerous?"

"The potion itself is not, but the situations in which it is used are very specific."

"Like rape," his son murmured softly next to him.

"Correct," he said.

"Has it ever been needed before at Hogwarts?" Harry asked, sharp green eyes peering at him inquisitively.

"At least once before," he answered after a small pause.

"Was it—was it something the Marauders did to you?" Harry's voice was strained, his body tense as he awaited an answer from him.

"Not me," Severus quickly clarified, watching in interest as the tension suddenly fled somewhat from his son's posture.

"But it was the Marauders, wasn't it," the teenager asked, green eyes hard like chips of ice.

"Yes."

"And Dumbledore never saw that as a clue?"

Severus sighed and directed him to sit on a nearby stool, while he took the one opposite.

"Albus Dumbledore sees what he wants to see," he answered tiredly, reaching out and latching their hands together. "I do not excuse his actions; I just want you to understand."

Harry licked his lips and looked away with a grimace, closing his eyes briefly as he did.

"I do understand," he said when he finally turned back.

"This potion's full title is Revelio Familius. It is specifically used in sexual assault cases between family members."

"But aren't most of the purebloods related already?"

"The potion is only used in cases where crimes have been committed by members of one's immediate family."

Severus watched Harry's face as he took in this new information. It was only thirty seconds or so before the boy's eyes widened and a look of horror came over his face.

"Regulus?" Harry whispered.

It was Severus's turn to look away and grimace.

"I found them, but not before they were able to run away. I took Regulus to Poppy and I told Dumbledore what had transpired. Regulus refused to speak, but I was—," he paused, thinking of how best to put it.

"It was more than just a grudge between them and I, and more than just anger was felt on my part towards them. Regulus Black entered Hogwarts a year after Sirius and I did. The attack happened during my fourth year," Severus laid it out for Harry to understand, and was not surprised to feel the boy's smaller hands clenching down hard upon his own.

"And Dumbledore did nothing," Harry said, looking just shy of murderous.

"If it had been the other way around, I am quite sure that the potion would have been used," was Severus's own bitter reply.

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"It certainly isn't your fault, child," he said in surprise.

"I know, but I can't help but wonder if Dumbledore's callous actions towards you and the other Slytherins was what forced you over to Voldy. So yeah, I'm sorry," Harry said sadly, standing up and hugging him tightly.

After a moment, his brain kicked in and he put his arms around his son in return.

"I'm not yet used to having someone on my side, Harry," he murmured softly into the boy's ear.

"I know. I'm not either," was the child's quiet response.

Chapter 23 – 3 Days Later

They say that the sane are the only ones who question their own sanity; that the insane are quite oblivious to the lack of sense their existence brings to the rest of reality.

They say that the insane are often perfectly content.

. . .

Percy Weasley didn't look up when they brought Arthur Weasley in to talk to him. He didn't answer any of their questions. He didn't look at the man whom he had called "dad" his entire life. He knew that they were fishing for answers. He knew that no one really knew what was going on.

Therefore, he kept his mouth shut, didn't look anyone in the eye, and waited to see what would happen in the meantime.

. . .

Rodney Weasley fell to one knee, barely able to conjure a bucket before he began vomiting forcefully. Thankfully, he was at home and alone.

Finally the attack passed and he looked up blearily from the mess in front of him. With a shuddery wave of his wand, he vanished the bucket and its contents and then shakily managed to make it to his feet. Leaning heavily on his dresser, he eyed himself in the mirror over it and grimaced. He looked like shit.

"Musta picked up a bug from that ol' castle," he mumbled to himself, shaking his head and immediately regretted it as his vision swam in front of his eyes. "Nasty children and their bugs," he grimaced, gripping his head tightly as he tried to regain his balance.

He needed to visit Percy. He needed to talk to his barrister. He needed . . . the room swam in front of his eyes once again and he swallowed hard against the nausea that was rising in his gullet.

The bed looked rather inviting, to tell the truth. It was nice and horizontal. It didn't move when he gingerly sat down on its edge. It didn't sway when he lay down upon its surface.

Thoughts of what he needed to do quickly floated out of his grasp as sweet unconsciousness took over his mind.

Although he could not see it, the sludge had continued to grow around him as it feasted on his subconscious. It had spread down his spine, wrapping itself around the bones themselves, pushing out into the nerve endings and within twenty-four hours, it would be in his bloodstream.

It was feasting on the rot that made up the innards of Rodney Weasley's mind and body, and in turn, it was poisoning him from the inside out.

. . .

Lies? Deceit?

What Is The Weasley Family Attempting To Weasel Out Of Now?

Severus picked up his paper interestedly and began reading.

After much exhaustive research, this reporter has found conclusive evidence that the Weasleys, one of the oldest pureblood families in Britain, are not as innocent and lighthearted as we have been led to believe!

Indeed fair readers, the Weasleys appear to have long been embroiled in dealings of an illicit nature. Just last week, Arthur and Percy Weasley (two prominent members of the Weasley family) were arrested by the Ministry.

As if that weren't enough, both of these men are also Ministry workers themselves!

"They were merely brought in for questioning and nothing more!" Prime Minister

Fudge blustered in a press conference early this week.

Then why was Arthur Weasley brought in by Kingsley Shacklebolt himself? Why has

his family not heard from him at all in five days? Despite what the Ministry might have us believe, something else is going on here.

This investigative reporter was not content to stop at these questions and has now uncovered yet another plot within the twisted walls of Hogwarts herself!

It seems that Ronald Weasley, youngest boy of the Weasley family, has also been attacked while at school; not so dissimilar a situation from the poor unfortunate muggle born girl earlier this term!

Could these attacks be tied into the subsequent arrests within the Weasley family?

My sources believe so. Will we ever get answers? Is Hogwarts truly as safe as we have been led to believe?

It seems that time will have to tell, given that the Ministry's lips are sealed!

Rita Skeeter reporting.

Severus raised an eyebrow and then proceeded to scan the rest of the newspaper carefully. He found what he was searching for at the very bottom of the sixth page, tucked in the corner beside an ad for Kwik Spell books.

An Unusual Adoption

In a move that would have seemed more unusual, if not for the boy's surprising resorting earlier this term, Severus Snape has formally adopted the boy-who-lived.

The corner of Severus's lips raised itself in quiet salute at the tiny blurb. He then put down the paper to look across the table at his son.

"Is everything okay, Sev—I mean, Dad?" Large green eyes stared back at him and he felt his smile increase.

"For us? I'd say so, Harry."

The boy smiled back at him and he felt his innards relax. He was glad he could give the child good news for once.

Later that morning, during a specially crafted three hour planning break between his classes, Severus Snape made his way to the infirmary. In his pocket sat a missive he had received that previous evening from Miss Granger's parents, positively answering his formal request to allow him to scan her mind for evidence regarding her attacker. He was fairly positive that they had sent one to their daughter as well, but had prepared himself on the off-chance he was met with any histrionics from the girl. Namely, he had taken a mild calming potion and was carrying an even stronger one in his front inside pocket of his teaching robes.

He briskly walked through the doors of the infirmary, hearing them swing shut behind him.

"Poppy," he greeted with a nod of his head, keeping his face carefully neutral in the presence of the other students there.

"Severus," she answers quietly, walking beside him, her shorter legs moving much faster than his significantly longer ones.

They reached the hallway where the Granger girl's private room was located and Severus mentally adjusted himself one final time. Poppy knocked on the door, giving the girl inside a bit of forewarning, and then they were inside the room itself.

"Professor," Hermione Granger greeted formally, her eyes downcast as she sat upon her bed.

"Miss Granger," he answered deeply, eyeing her critically.

The girl's face was very pale, making the dark circles under her eyes appear just that much worse. Discomfort was nearly literally rolling off the girl's slightly hunched shoulders, and he realized that he needed to start this before that degraded into full fledged panic.

"Miss Granger, would you prefer to have Madam Pomfrey present or not?"

Hermione shook her head slightly and then raised it slightly, "I'd rather she not be present, sir."

Beside him, Poppy nodded as though she had expected her dismissal, turning on her heel almost immediately.

"I'll be just in the next room," she told them both, resting her eyes on his own for a rather significant moment before leaving.

With a small flick of his wand, he conjured two comfortable chairs and arranged them beside the bed so that they faced one another.

"Miss Granger? If you would?" He directed her to sit, while he himself took the chair closest to the wall.

"Will this hurt, sir?" Her voice had none of its usual polite overtones. Indeed, he could only detect fear from her, making this a truly uncomfortable situation.

"You may have something of a headache following the experience," he answered slowly, flicking his eyes towards her face casually. "If so, you can request a potion from either myself or Madam Pomfrey."

Silence as he watched the child chew delicately on the inside of her lip.

"I mean sir," she finally bit out, holding her hands tightly together in her lap, "will it hurt to remember?"

Severus deliberately crossed his legs before looking steadily back at her.

"To remember what happened? To remember how it happened? Or to remember whom it is that is at fault?"

The girl in front of him shrugged and looked away, her shoulders hunched even farther down as she pulled her arms up against her chest defensively.

He narrowed his eyes and laced his fingers in his lap thoughtfully.

"I'm not one to sugarcoat situations, Miss Granger," he said at last. "But I can assure you of one thing; whatever you experience, you will not be alone whilst you do so, understand?"

"Miss Granger?" He prompted again softly when she did not answer.

"I understand sir," she finally responded, her voice hoarse with emotion.

"All I need you to do now is to look me in the eye," he paused as she finally met his own dark orbs, "and relax," he added in a soft voice.

Bloodshot eyes, he noted as he pushed past the physical and into her mind proper.

It did not surprise him in the least to find that her mind was laid out like a large library setting. The first stacks and rows were in impeccable order, showing very little wear or tear, so he pushed past them and moved closer to the more dimly sections. Every so often his eye would catch on a title and he would stop and then readjust his path; especially if it was obvious he was heading off in the wrong direction.

He came upon a section listed "Cartography" and slowed his steps to look more carefully at it. Maps of her home, of her primary school, of Hogwarts—that one he had to deliberately pry his eyes away from—and tucked away in a far dusty corner, with several books related to "Muggle Law Basics," he found a scroll labeled "Harry's Home."

Crouching down, he unrolled it to discover a nearly perfect replica of the Dursley's home, as seen through the eyes of his son. Hermione had never been to the boy's house, he would have known after all this time, but the girl had somehow managed to piece together the exact layout just from the clues she had heard spoken by the boy and likely the Weasleys.

Peering closer, he noted that there was the damnable cupboard under the stairs, circled in what he had originally thought to be blackish brown ink. Touching a finger to it, he scratched a bit of it off and brought it up to his nose to smell.

Blood.

Narrowing his eyes, he swore under his breath and stood back up, placing the scroll back where it had been, but overlaying it with several protective spells as well.

"It would be dangerous to leave that lying about in such a manner, Miss Granger," he said quietly into the silence around him.

No answer. He wasn't entirely sure he had been expecting one, but it would have helped. If he had an opportunity to do so later on, he would bring it up again when they were face to face once more.

Something squeaked to his right and he whirled around, just as a light rumble shook the large room.

"Miss Granger?" He called out in a slightly louder voice.

No answer.

His wand out, he stepped towards where he had heard the sound, keeping his eyes open for anything out of the ordinary as he moved farther back into the recesses of her mind.

"The Lady's Guide to Comportment," the title seemed to jump out at him and he paused in his search and peered closer at the shelf upon which it sat.

"'Tis not polite to stare!" A woman's voice lashed out at him from somewhere above him and he jerked backwards reflexively.

There was now a wall behind this particular shelf and he realized with a start that there was also a portrait of a severe looking woman staring down at him from it.

"The napkin should never be crumpled. Nor should it be folded neatly!" The woman said in an even louder voice, glaring angrily at him.

"And women are not to raise their voices, hmm?" He glared back, having gotten over his surprise.

"You are not welcome here! Unmarried, are you?" She sniped, eyeing his hand haughtily.

"I was invited, madam," he answered crisply. "I shall be on my way then."

He had only taken two steps before being confronted with another portrait of the same woman. This time it was hung on the side of a large shelf of books, taller than his head.

"Men are all the same! Only interested in seeing a girl's knickers!" The austere woman said; the portrait now less than an arm's length from his face.

"I beg your pardon," he shot back, affronted. "But who are you? And why are you here?"

"Typical male!" Another portrait of the same woman appeared a few rows down and he walked towards it quickly.

"Why do you say that?"

"Asking the lady of the house for her name when you have not yet seen fit to introduce your own self!"

Lady of the house? This is not Hermione Granger, surely!

"I am Professor Severus Snape. And you are?"

"Professor Snape! I thought that was you!" Another portrait called out, the same grating voice coming from farther down the aisle. He followed it and found yet another of the exact same woman.

"Hermione has told us about you certainly!"

Told us? Could this be her mother? Why on earth is the girl's mind filled with such a domineering version of her matriarch?

"Where is she?" He asked icily.

"Why should I tell you?" The portrait version of Mrs. Granger sniffed disdainfully at him. "I can see what you're thinking about, yes I can! You'd just love to get her alone and then—."

"—Madam!" He cut her off angrily. "How dare you—."

"ALL MEN ARE THE SAME!" They shouted at him. "ALL MEN ARE THE SA—," they tried to shout again, but he had wasted enough time on their inane behaviors and cut them off with a silencing spell.

Another rumble worked its way through the floorboards and he had to grab onto a shelf to keep his feet. He glanced back at the portrait nearest him only to discover it missing. He turned around and discovered that the others were gone as well.

Their sudden absence unnerved him, but he forced himself to turn his back on the now empty aisle and continue on forwards.

Abruptly he heard a loud crack and the unmistakable sound of falling books. He ran towards the sound, noticing that the bookcases here were older, less sturdy looking. Some had burn marks running down their sides, while others had more jagged edges that seemed to grab at him as he went past them. Likewise, the rows the shelves sat in were no longer even and orderly, but instead seemed to meander off in various directions; sometimes even going directly through strangely placed walls, only to come out on the other side with completely different subjects.

The floor here was carpeted, same as earlier in the library, but like the bookcases, there were scorch marks, and even had a few pools of what looked like dried blood.

Everything was also darker, more torches burnt out than lit.

He turned the corner of a particularly large bookcase, its wooden sides as gnarled as some of the oldest trees in the Forbidden Forest, and came to a complete halt at the site that greeted him.

A large canopy bed stood in the midst of this new clearing; its surface covered in lavish silks and fine linens. It was lit with an unearthly glow, causing him to blink repeatedly in the markedly different light.

"Oh, so there you are," came a softer voice from his left.

He turned his head and had to fight against dropping his jaw at the figure that was walking towards him. It was Hermione, but it was a form of her unlike any he had ever seen. Her hair was brushed out and shining healthily in the oddly bright light behind her, but that's not what drew his eyes towards her with such shock.

She was very nearly naked, her young lithe form covered only in a draping made entirely out of some kind of shimmering gauzy material that flickered as she moved.

He swallowed hard and looked resolutely at her face.

"Like what you see?" She asked him demurely, an absolutely wicked look in her eyes as she walked right up to him.

"Where are your clothes, Miss Granger?" He answered in a cold voice. The sight of her naked was turning his stomach slightly. She was his student for Merlin's sake. She wasn't even of age.

Just a child.

"Do you not care for my outfit?" She asked with a hard laugh, turning in a circle before him as though to show off her absent threads.

"I do not," he answered stiffly.

"Perhaps I should take it off then," she answered in what he was certain was meant to be a provocative manner.

"You are my student, Miss Granger," he gritted out, turning his eyes away from her ever so slightly to peer at the walls of bookcases almost completely surrounding them. "There is nothing you could do or say that would make me want you in such a lewd and lascivious manner."

Her hands touched the front of his robes and he jerked away from her roughly.

"Oh come on professor," she laughed and the sound of it chilled him. "It could be fun," she said, running her tongue over her lips devilishly.

The floor rumbled a bit, shaking loose some of the books that had become precariously perched during the other quakes. When he

looked back at her, he was surprised to see that there was now bruising around her neck and chest, easily visible through her outfit, such as it was.

"Miss Granger, how did you acquire such injuries?"

"What injuries?" She answered coyly, running a hand down her chest with a smile.

He took a step closer to her and allowed her to put her hands on him once more in order to have a better look.

"Tell me child, who bit you so horrendously?"

She smiled and shook her head, just as the floor began rumbling again. This time he managed to stand his ground, but she was forced to hold onto him for balance. When the aftershocks ended, he was unsurprised to see that more bruises had sprung to the surface, and as she turned, he realized that they extended down her spine and to the back of her legs.

"Someone has hurt you. Can you not tell me who they were?"

"Oh Snapey," she sighed, throwing her arms around his neck and drawing him down closer. "All's fair in love and war, right?" The look on her face was dreamy and frightening in its deceptive calm.

"This is not love," he answered vehemently. "Rape is not a part of love."

She removed her arms from his neck and he straightened once more, looking sadly down at her.

"He does love me."

"He?" Severus raised an eyebrow.

"My lover," she said with a giggle.

He stepped away from her once more and thought about how to proceed next. Where was Hermione Granger in all of this? Was this just some kind of sex addled part of her teenage mind? The real Hermione Granger had always seemed much more intelligent and

down to earth than the imp who was still dancing before him, her eyes glazed as she moved to a tune only she could hear.

"What of your dreams, Miss Granger?"

She stopped and looked up at him curiously.

"What of them?"

"What if he hurts you again? What if the damage is too great for Madam Pomfrey to fix? You will miss school," he said gravely, knowing all too well how much importance she placed upon her schooling.

"My lover wouldn't hurt me. He loves me," she said with an impatient flip of her hair.

"And what of your mother?" He asked carefully.

"My mother?" Hermione asked softly, her eyes finally coming into focus for the first time in several minutes.

"Have you told her about this 'lover' of yours?" He asked with a neutral expression.

"She wouldn't understand," was the soft response.

"I daresay not."

"You don't understand. She doesn't let me have any of this, any of this!" She suddenly screeched, making the walls rattle with the strength of her outburst.

"Explain it to me," his voice calm, soothing.

"She thinks I'm her princess, her doll; something to be locked up away in the tower and then brought to life by some Prince Charming!"

Suddenly it hit him; he knew what was missing from the scene before him. Where was the fantasy section in all of this? With a mother like that, he shuddered slightly at the memory, surely the girl had to have a place to escape to within the fictional world?

"And you think otherwise?" He prompted, moving closer to one of the nearby shelves and flicking his eyes over its contents quickly. There was nothing on these shelves except magazines aimed at attracting young female girls, witches and muggles alike.

"To stand a certain way, to talk a certain way, to be a certain way; she has been after me my entire life to be the perfect young lady!"

He glanced at another shelf and was brought up short by a row of some magazine called "Seventeen." He raised an eyebrow and moved on.

"And where do your dreams fall into the mold your mother has made for you?" He asked gently, looking back into her warm brown eyes once more.

"If I have my way, Sleeping Beauty will never awake!" She spat venomously.

He could have slapped himself.

"Accio 'Sleeping Beauty,'" he called out softly. He felt something pull at his wand hand, but no book appeared.

"What do you think you're doing?" The version of Hermione Granger asked him suspiciously, coming closer to him again at long last.

"Looking for something," he murmured more to himself than to her. "Point me Sleeping Beauty," he added in a whisper.

"You don't want to talk to her!"

"Please refrain from making judgments upon my person, Miss Granger," he answered in a chiding voice.

His wand was pointed towards the bed? He shook his head and went in that direction.

"Little Miss Goody Two-Shoes! She's no fun!" The girl screeched out at him, trying to get in his way and sounding more and more like her wretched mother.

"Neither am I," he sneered, stepping past her easily and going right up to the bed itself. Now that he was closer, and his eyes were no longer blinded quite so badly by the unearthly light, he could see what he had not been able to see before.

The bed wasn't a piece of furniture. No, the bed was made out of books. More importantly, it was the missing fantasy section.

And right where the top of the mattress was, right where a pillow would go, was where he found the missing book.

"Sleeping Beauty," he breathed, reaching out and picking up the book carefully. It was very worn and clearly a much loved favorite. On its cover he found a picture of Hermione Granger and he gave a very tiny smile.

He opened the cover and watched in some awe as a bolt of light threw itself out of the pages and struck the other Hermione Granger directly in the chest. Instantly she crumpled, disappearing before her gown even hit the ground.

He looked with interest back into the book and began to read.

Chapter 24 – Copycats

Hermione had always fought with Ron. It was a familiar part of her life. That hadn't changed when they had finally gotten together. They still fought. They still argued.

What did change was how they spent the rest of their time.

It hadn't taken much to get her into bed with him. Oh, she had put up a token effort of putting him off until marriage or until they were at least engaged, but truthfully she had been just as interested as him. Maybe it was because she knew her mother Wouldn't Approve of it in the least. That's how it appeared in her mind too. She always imagined her mother's opinions capitalized. The woman had very specific ideas of how a young woman Should Behave, and Hermione suspected that she often did not measure up to those preexisting standards.

It had mattered to her very much as a child, but that desire to prove herself to her mother had waned somewhat when she had discovered Hogwarts and magic. Learning was all well and good; it was something her mother had Emphasized throughout her childhood after all, but there was more to being a woman than just intelligence.

Poise and dignity made up significant parts of that subject, and while Hermione knew the fundamentals of such ideals, she had never been very adept at putting them to practice.

Thus, when Ron had first asked her to be his girlfriend and then later asked her into his bed, it hadn't taken much for her to agree to go against her mother's wishes that she do otherwise.

Perhaps, like Harry and his relatives (although for very different reasons), Hermione instinctively knew that she would never be able to meet her mother's overly ambitious standards.

"Except she was right," Hermione said softly, appearing on the bed next to Severus.

He looked up from the book in surprise and looked the girl over appraisingly. This Hermione was dressed in actual clothes, a definite improvement from her previous counterpart.

"How exactly was your mother right, child?"

"No good would come of him, of us, of me . . ." she trailed off and looked away, seeming to hunch in on herself as she did.

"What did he do to you?" He reached out a hand to touch her shoulder, but pulled it back just before doing so.

It likely would have not been well received.

"She won't tell you if she knows what's good for her!" A booming voice came from his other side.

Severus threw himself to his feet, his wand out in one hand, holding Sleeping Beauty to his chest protectively with the other. Ron Weasley, in all of his naked glory, was standing in front of him with a sneer to rival that of the worst Slytherin plastered on his face.

Severus very pointedly did not look down past the boy's neck, nor did he drop his wand.

"If she doesn't want to be feeling it tomorrow!" Ron raised his voice and peered around Severus to the still quiet Hermione.

Out of the corner of his eye, Severus saw a slight flinch from the girl and he gave the boy opposite him a particularly dark look for it.

"You are not welcome here, Mr. Weasley," he said, speaking in as cold a voice as possible.

There was no good reason for the boy to have such a strong presence within the girl's mind. After all, the child's mother was as strong a matriarch as any he had ever seen. The woman could likely put some of Black's relatives to shame, and yet here she was only a portrait, while the boy was a fully fleshed creature.

He couldn't bring himself to think of Weasley as a man. If what they suspected of the youngest Weasley male was true, then he truly was anything but.

I am staring down a monster from within a traumatized child's mind.

"That's not what she says," Weasley said with a distasteful leer.

"She is confused. That's why I am here," Severus retorted quickly, taking a step closer.

"Why would she trust you? She's my girlfriend," Weasley challenged.

"And as my student, I have sworn to protect her," he said, taking another step forwards.

"Protect her from what?"

"You! Avada Kedavra!" He shouted. Weasley's face contorted in response to the bright green flash and behind him he heard Hermione scream.

Then abruptly, Weasley disappeared from sight and he turned back to face the frightened girl.

"You k-killed him!" A teary eyed Hermione accused.

"Only a copy of him, Miss Granger," he replied tiredly. "It would seem that Mr. Weasley has been poking around in your mind when you were not looking."

"W-Why would he do that! He wouldn't!" She spluttered, staring wide eyed back at him.

Ignoring her, Severus turned back to the bed and picked up the book again.

"Are you listening to me! He wouldn't do that!" She screeched.

"Who are you trying to convince?" He responded without looking up from the story account in his hands.

Hermione looked at her naked reflection in the mirror, bringing a hand up to hesitantly touch the bruises across her chest and neck. She enjoyed the sex, but she wished they could make love to one another without her being in pain afterwards. It wasn't sexy to be hurt. It almost seemed that Ron didn't know his own strength sometimes.

"Hermione? Honey? Are you in there?"

Shite! Her mum!

Quickly, she grabbed her robe and wrapped it around her body, hoping that it was enough to cover the bruises on her neck.

"All clean," she said upon opening the door and presenting herself.

"Are you okay Hermione?" Her mother asked, going over her with a critical eye.

"Just a little tired mum," she murmured, slipping past her and going to her room.

"Hermione . . ."

"Mum, what? I'm really tired. I just want to go to bed," was her impatient answer.

"I know you think you love him, Hermione, but maybe it's time to take a break? Just for a few days. You're worn out. I don't know what you two have been doing—."

"—You don't know, because you've never cared to ask, mum," Hermione interrupted, a touch angrily.

"He's a boy, Hermione. You know what boys want."

"I care a lot for him, mum. And he cares for me! I'm fifteen years old. You weren't much older than that when you married daddy!"

"And I admitted that I should have waited! You can be an adult for the rest of your life. Are you sure you want to take that step now?"

If only her mother knew.

"She doesn't care about what I want," Hermione said with a snarl, distracting Severus from the account.

"And what exactly do you want, Miss Granger?"

"I—," the girl started and then turned away, her eyes distant as she thought. "I want to belong with someone," she said finally, turning back to him.

He nodded. "But not to someone, correct?"

The girl didn't answer.

"There is a difference, Miss Granger; 'with' implies equal standing, while 'to' implies ownership. Is Mr. Weasley your equal? Or is he your keeper?"

She looked away and after a moment he went back to his reading.

"Come on Hermione! No one's gonna catch us!" Ron whinged pathetically to her. They were sitting in what Severus recognized as the Gryffindor common room.

"I'm not ready for that yet, Ron!" She hissed back in a low voice to him, trying to focus on the text in her lap.

Severus noted with some interest that it was his potions textbook that she was using to ignore the annoying redheaded boy.

"Fine," the boy finally huffed, slumping back in the garishly red armchair.

Hermione smiled at him for a moment and then went back to her studies. As a result, she missed the flare of fury that briefly burned in Ron's eyes at her rebuttal.

"You can try to ignore me all you like! But it won't work!" The petulant voice came from Severus's other side and looked up from the book to find a—thankfully—clothed Ronald Weasley sitting there with a twisted expression on his pale face.

"She'll see! I'll teach her a lesson!" He hissed, barely glancing at Severus.

"And did you?" He asked warily.

"Keep reading," Ronald grinned coldly at him.

She thought she could refuse him what he wanted?

He had studied a lot more that previous summer than ever before. He had discovered muggle sleeping pills. They were a cheaper alternative to obtaining the wizarding potions equivalents. And of course, Percy had helped him.

"Why did he help you?" Severus looked back to the Weasley copy still sitting beside him.

"Because I knew he'd been fucking Ginny!"

A Weasley willing to blackmail an incestuous brother? It is mindboggling.

He turned back to where Hermione had flopped down on the floor and narrowed his eyes. She was staring off listlessly into space, her eyes wide and unseeing.

"You did this to her," he hissed, grabbing Ronald by the front of his shirt and pulling him in close to his face.

"She wouldn't do what I said," the boy—the monster—grinned back, completely unconcerned with his own safety.

Why should he be? The real Ronald Weasley isn't here.

"How many times have you tampered with her memory?"

The boy sneered back at him. "As many times as I wanted."

"Every time you adjusted her memory, you left a piece of yourself behind, am I correct?" Severus growled; his hypothesis confirmed as the damnable boy started giggling.

"How many times?"

Weasley only laughed harder, ignoring Severus as his countenance grew decidedly darker. Then, without warning, he snapped and threw a hard right at the idiotic creature. Ronald Weasley's head cracked backwards into the hard book bound bedpost, his nose smashed and leaking blood.

"She deserved it," Weasley managed before rolling off the bed and melting away into the shadows.

Severus blinked in surprise and then looked down at his hand. It was fine.

"Miss Granger," he called out to the quiet girl on the floor. No answer. He sighed and looked back down at the book next to him.

A part of him wondered if it would be best to leave the girl's mind now and go hunt Ronald Weasley down.

But will she recover if I leave now? Will I even be able to find my way back in here again?

A distant rumble rolled through the massive library of Hermione's mind, and again he heard the telltale sounds of books being thrown from previously sturdy bookcases. The girl's world was breaking up, albeit slowly, but there was no doubt that her mind was beginning to crumble under the stress it was under.

It seemed that his question had been answered. He bent his head back down and studiously continued reading.

It hadn't been very hard for him to slip the ground up pills into Hermione's pumpkin juice. His girlfriend was so studious, so diligent; she barely noticed what she ate when she was studying, let alone that her drink had taken on an extra tang.

After that, it hadn't been very hard to convince her to take a short nap with him in his bed. Hermione, of course, was completely unaware that her sleepiness was medically induced, and of course would take more than a half an hour to recover from.

Severus blinked and quite suddenly he could see the situation unfolding in front of him. He was standing in the midst of the darkened Gryffindor boy's dorm, standing beside a bed with its curtains drawn. On a whim, he reached out and pulled the heavy fabric aside, revealing an unconscious Miss Granger and a gleeful Weasley.

The boy didn't look up at him, but Severus hadn't expected him to, since this seemed to be nothing more than a memory.

"Think you can deny me? Watch this!" Weasley whispered cruelly in her ear while drawing his hands down her sides.

Severus swallowed hard and steeled himself to watch as the rape unfolded before him.

"Miss Granger, where are you?" He called out, turning away from the unsettling scene and looking around the room.

No answer.

"This is your memory, Miss Granger! He took this from you! Don't you have anything to say?"

No answer.

Scowling, Severus turned back to the bed and took out his wand. "Stupefy!"

The beam of light hit Weasley in the middle of his chest and the boy dropped like a rock, disappearing as soon as his body hit the mattress.

Abruptly the ground under his feet began shaking, and the room began spinning madly around him. He closed his eyes against its sickening swirl and counted backwards through the ingredients in the Wolfbane potion.

He was only halfway through when the shaking stopped, and he hesitatingly opened his eyes.

"You don't get to say no to me, bitch!" Weasley slapped Hermione viciously across the face and then threw her struggling form on his bed.

"Ron! No! Stop, please!" She cried out as he kept slapping her.

Weasley finally stopped and then dragged his hand down to her trousers, pulling them open and then unzipping himself.

"What—What are you doing?" Hermione's voice was frightened.

"What's it look like, you little bitch?" Weasley retorted nastily, before driving himself into her body with an angry thrust.

"Do you see now, Miss Granger?" Severus called out to the room around them.

He thought he heard a soft sob come from behind him, but when he turned and looked, there was no one there.

"Incarcerous!" He shouted as he turned back around, ropes shooting from his wand and wrapping tightly around Weasley's surprised form.

And as before, the instant the ropes stilled, the boy's body disappeared from sight. And as before, the ground shook and the world swirled and Severus closed his eyes against the nauseating sight.

Again and again they went through the similar scenarios; Severus breaking the obliviations one by one before they happened in her forgotten memories; and Hermione letting herself move closer to the truth within her own mind.

Then without warning, suddenly silence came over the room they were in, and Severus found himself with an armful of weeping Hermione.

With an effort, Severus opened his eyes again to find the white sterile white walls of Hermione's infirmary room staring down at him. He looked up and saw a tear streaked face looking back at him from the opposite chair, and without thinking he stood up and drew her into his arms.

"It's t-true," she sobbed into his chest, holding onto him as though he were the last thing standing in-between her and madness.

"Yes, Miss Granger. It's true," he answered tiredly, directing her over to the bed. It was difficult, but he finally managed to convince her to release her stranglehold on his robes.

"Drink, Miss Granger," he instructing, holding the Dreamless sleep in front of her mouth, a warning in his eyes should she try to say no.

After she was asleep, Severus collapsed back in his seat and rested in his pounding head in his hands. He was exhausted and nauseated.

He wished he could truly rest, but there was still too much to be done.

Chapter 25 - Gryffindor

"He literally left pieces of himself behind?" Albus asked.
"Fascinating."

Their discussion was taking place in Madam Pomfrey's office after she had refused to let Severus leave without a thorough checkout. However, in light of the dangerous situation, she had at least agreed to call Dumbledore down to the infirmary for him, provided he let her work without arguing.

"More like slivers of soul, individual hair sized pieces," Severus confirmed wearily, his eyes closed even though Poppy had dimmed the lights considerably. His head was pounding unmercifully and it was only by the strength of his constitution that he was managing to refrain from vomiting in the presence of the headmaster.

"He had an unusual sense of ownership for Miss Granger and her mind," he added.

"How many times Severus?"

Without looking up, Severus still heard the change in Dumbledore's demeanor.

"More than twenty," he admitted slowly. As though it weren't bad enough to have memories of the Death Eater's exploits in his memories; now he had to have numerous rapes committed by a student against another student as well?

It was clearly time to pull out his old pensieve once again. He didn't want these memories, and they did him no good in his business dealings either, so there was no reason to keep them.

"Please let Poppy take care of you, Severus," he heard the old man say, accompanied by the rustling of his robes as Albus stood up.

"You are going to contact the aurors then?" He asked, squinting painfully up at his employer.

"I will do what needs to be done."

"Tell me you are going to contact the aurors, Albus," Severus asked with a bit of flint in his tone.

"I will contact the aurors," Albus responded, a bit of twinkle making it through to Severus even through the blur of his migraine. "In the meantime Severus," an old hand patted his shoulder gently, "Please rest."

He would have snorted, but it likely would have hurt, so he abstained.

Dumbledore would have made a damn fine Slytherin. He had no doubt that Albus wasn't telling him something. He just hoped that it wouldn't come back to bite either of them in the arse.

. . .

Albus hurried from the infirmary after concluding his conversation with Severus. His heart beating haphazardly in his ears, he quickly made his way across the castle to Minerva's quarters. He paused outside her door, his thoughts on what Severus had said about the aurors and he quickly made a decision. Calling Fawkes to his side, he scratched out a short note to Kingsley and gave it his familiar.

"Travel slowly Fawkes," he instructed softly, scratching under his beak in the good spot that usually made the phoenix trill happily. This time however, all he got was a solemn look for his troubles and then there was a brief flash and the bird was gone.

He had a chance to make it up to Harry, to make up for his mistakes that previous year. He had a chance to do something right, but only if they could respond before the aurors got there.

So he knocked on the door and waited impatiently for it to open.

. . .

The crud reached the Gryffindor tower that morning. It oozed into the nooks and crannies surrounding the common room, hiding itself in the walls like rats in an infested house. And then it waited for the object of its desires to arrive.

. . .

Ronald Weasley looked out over the other students in the Gryffindor common room like a king surveying his minions. The only ones still not falling in line were some of the Gryffindor first years, and of course, who could forget his own siblings? They had made it quite clear that he was beneath their recognition; at least, that was how he had interpreted it.

His day had gone quite well, all considering. He hadn't seen Dumbledore or Snape any after that morning at breakfast, and from what he had heard, neither had anyone else. His dearest girlfriend was still in the infirmary, but at least her absence was giving people plenty of reasons to feel pity for him—the poor suffering boyfriend.

In fact, he looked over to Lavender, who as sitting next to him on the sofa next to the wall, perhaps it was time to cash in on some more of that suffering boyfriend card.

He was reaching for her hand when suddenly she froze, her eyes on something behind his head. For a moment, his faux look of endearment vanished and he gave a silent snarl. What right did she have to look away from him?

But the anger passed from his face when he saw the other students around him beginning to point and whisper as well.

Curious now, he turned and looked at the far wall and immediately stilled at the strange sight that greeted his eyes. The wall was glistening with some kind of purplish-brown semi-gelatinous goo. It was dripping, actually oozing down the expanse of the stones embedded in the wall's surface.

"What is that?" Someone whispered from behind them, but he didn't respond. Brusquely shaking off Lavender's clinging hands, he somehow managed to make it to his feet, his eyes never leaving the strange phenomenon occurring directly in front of them.

And then the smell hit them.

It was a thousand times worse than rotting eggs or fresh manure. It was an old and dirty smell; a grim smell, if he wanted to be completely honest with himself. Around him, he could hear his fellow

lions beginning to cough at the odor that was pushing itself through the air towards them.

Unbeknownst to any of those in the room, the crud had also taken it upon itself to lock every window and had even gone so far as to seal the common room door.

Beside him, he could hear Lavender gagging, but he ignored her as the smell triggered memories continued to make their way across his mind's eye in quick succession.

He remembered the first time his "uncle" Rodney ever touched him in a way that he didn't like. He remembered the powerless feelings that bubbled in his chest, the burning hatred of himself for letting him get away with it.

He remembered learning that his other siblings, with the exception of Percy, didn't have to go through those sorts of things with Rodney, and he remembered the heartbreaking feeling of betrayal at his parents for not caring enough to make the abuse stop.

It didn't matter that they hadn't known. He knew that his behavior was different before and after a visit to his uncle's house. Why couldn't they have noticed? What was wrong with him that they couldn't see his anguish, his pain afterwards? Did they simply discount his discomfort as signs that he was different?

What had he done that had been bad enough to warrant this kind of treatment?

The crud in the room sensed his mental turmoil and it fed on his suffering.

Around him, the students were beginning to scream as the goo oozed its way towards him, but he couldn't move, couldn't see past his own horrific memories. Within the room now, a great space had been opened up around him as the other students moved away from the slowly flowing river of crud.

As if that weren't bad enough, the other walls also began to drip and sweat with the putrid goop; effectively turning the Gryffindor common room into a chamber of stinking misery, as students, young and old tried in vain to escape its disgusting grasp.

. . .

"I know who attacked Hermione Granger."

That was all he said when Minerva finally opened her door. Had it been any other situation, he might have reveled in the look of surprise on her face, but it was neither the time nor place for that.

"Who?" His tightlipped professor answered, eyes flashing with promised violence.

"Mr. Weasley—Ronald," Dumbledore answered with regret.

Minerva sucked in a breath and put a hand to her mouth. "Are you certain, Albus?"

"Yes," he answered, focusing his baby blue eyes on her own steely gaze.

"Has he been taken into custody?"

"The aurors have not yet responded," he answered somewhat vaguely.

A visible clenching of her jaw, and then Minerva nodded, automatically understanding the offer he was presenting to her.

"Then let's rectify that situation, Albus," she said fiercely, eyes blazing with long pent up rage.

So they went.

. . .

Ronald Weasley was trembling, but was otherwise completely still and silent, surprisingly enough. He was now completely surrounded by a circle of slightly pulsating semi-gelatinous crud, while the rest of the Gryffindors looked on in fear from beyond that barrier.

The sludge was still spreading itself out along the floor and surfaces of the common room; its fingerlike tendrils appearing to reach themselves out to the other students. Some of the older students

had banded together and were now throwing defensive spells at such outcroppings, but were having little success at permanently impeding its motion.

Interestingly enough, most of the first year students and the rest of the Weasleys were noticeably unaffected by the sludge's continued growth, and it did not take them too long to realize that. The Weasley twins managed to make their way over to the others before long, gathering the children in a safe, seemingly out of the way corner of the room.

It was then that the crud chose to attack Ron.

It surged forwards, pushing itself literally off of the ground and then forming an impenetrable murky dome over his unmoving figure.

"Ron!" Ginny squealed, trying to go to him, but she was caught by the twins and forced to stay back. Even though he had been a horrible brother, he was still her brother, as she tried to explain later on to anyone who would listen.

. . .

He was trapped in his mind, and his mind was trapped in the past.

Ron remembered exactly when his anger moved from being directed at himself to his parents, and then to the rest of those around him. He remembered when he chose hurt others, instead of the other way around. He remembered praying, bloody praying for someone to notice, for someone to do something to help him and no one doing anything.

He remembered, and while he did, the dome of sludge shrunk around him, binding itself to his body and deeper.

The other students were having a much different reaction as the crud came in contact with their skin. The Weasley twins and Ginny watched in mortified silence as one by one, their classmates each fell to the floor twitching and then slumping in what appeared to be a dead faint. It was discovered later that each of them had merely fallen into a sort of catatonic "resting" state; while their minds were forced to relive their very worst nightmares—real and imagined.

. . .

Meanwhile, outside the Gryffindor tower, Albus and Minerva were unsuccessfully arguing with the portrait of the Fat Lady.

In all his tenure there, Albus had never been refused entry to the tower, but it seemed that the day was one for surprises.

"I absolutely cannot let you in," she answered yet again.

"I'm sure I could invite Sirius Black up for a visit sometime," he countered, finally resorting to threats. "I know how well you got along with him last time."

"The man with the knife?" She whispered, her eyes wide.

"Precisely," Albus said, blue eyes twinkling dangerously.

"If you are truly sure you need to go inside . . ." she answered tremulously.

"We are," Minerva answered exasperatedly.

"If you insist then," the Fat Lady said, giving a small shrug before opening the door.

Although the door was open, the passageway was still blocked.

"Albus, what is that?" Minerva stepped a bit closer to the wall of glimmering sludge barring their entry into the common room.

"No, don't," he cautioned, grabbing her arm and pulling her backwards.

Although the strength of the dark magical taint on the sludge was blurring his vision, he could still think, and he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that touching the strange slime covered wall in front of them would only lead to more unpleasantness.

He recognized the scent from the lingering smell he had found in the corridor outside the room Ronald Weasley had been attacked in. And just as it had then, it now reminded him of the smell of death, the smell of ultimate failure of life to overcome its trials.

He closed his eyes and wandlessly cast the bubble headed charm over them both; which cleared the air immediately around them and allowed him to focus his mind once again. Now breathing deeply, he called the senses of the castle forwards in his mind and sought to determine what was going on inside the tower itself.

Prone forms of students were laid out across the sludge filled floor . . .

An odd six foot construction sitting in the middle of the room . . . he could sense a person inside, slowly being drained of life . . .

And in the corner, three flame haired teenagers standing, guarding a handful of very small Gryffindors.

Still connected to the magical castle within his mind, Albus stretched his magical edges of himself out into the edges of the corridor and gathered the strength of the castle behind his wand, before casting the spell.

"Expurgo," he rumbled in a dual toned voice, the magic of the castle mixing with his own to brutally force its way past the barrier in front of them.

A bright orange beam shot from his wand towards the dark purple almost brown wall, and for a moment the barrier seemed to absorb the powerful bolt of magic into itself, twisting before their eyes around the point of impact. The wall shimmered before them once, and then it twisted again, spraying a bit of itself outwards towards them, and Albus instinctively raised a shield over himself and Minerva in response.

As it turned out, it was a good idea, considering what happened next. The wall changed colors before their eyes; morphing into a strange blackish red substance and then without warning, it exploded, spraying out against his protective shield.

Albus, with the help of the castle herself, was able to keep the shield in place, but only just so. He could feel the magic of the slime hit the magic of his shield, and he saw it smoke briefly from each point of contact, like sparks of fire against a cool surface.

They looked up after the smoke had dissipated and he heard Minerva gasp at the sight that appeared before them. The wall was gone and the sludge was slowly beginning to disappear as well, but the floor was still littered with the unmoving forms of Gryffindor students of all ages.

He carefully stepped up into the room proper, idly thinking back on a time much long past, where he had once considered the entrance to be a great deal farther up. He reached back to give Minerva a hand, but she was already up and pushing past him.

"Albus, what has happened here?" Minerva asked from where she was leant over the still body of Dean Thomas.

"If we were muggles," Albus and Minerva jerked their heads up sharply towards the sound of Fred and George Weasley speaking from the far side of the room. "We'd probably say that we were just . . ."

"SLIMED." They said in unison, their faces strangely solemn. Then they moved and behind them they could see that the youngest Weasley child, surrounded by four or five Gryffindor first years. Each of the children were very pale, and a couple were actively crying.

Ginny's eyes were wet as well, and it was then that Albus realized that Ronald Weasley was not standing beside them. He wasn't with them, and neither was the strange domed object he had seen through the vision of the castle.

Delicately, he stepped forwards, being careful not to step on the still, yet breathing students. The dome had been near a wall, he was quite certain, and near a sofa and—he turned, eyes narrowed in thought. There.

Ronald Weasley lay flat upon his back, arms spread out to his sides limply, looking for all the world like every other felled student there, minus one noticeable exception. His eyes were open, his blue eyes staring upwards and unseeing towards the ceiling. He was still alive, yes Albus's magic confirmed that with one diagnostic test, but unlike the rest of his classmates, his features were utterly calm, even slack in appearance.

There was a great clatter of footsteps originating from the hallway, and he turned back towards the portrait opening, feeling numbness creeping through his extremities as he moved.

"Headmaster? What has happened?" Kingsley Shacklebolt was the first of many aurors to pour into the common room around him, and for once, Albus found himself utterly without words.

"Contact St. Mungos at once!" Minerva answered for him instead. "We need help now!"

Kingsley's brown eyes continued to rest on his own blue, and finally Albus managed to nod in agreement.

"Yes, she is right. We need help," he answered tiredly.

Chapter 26 – Mangled Mess

Severus looked at the vial of bluish green potion in his hand as he walked up to the headmaster's office. It was the long awaited Revelos Familias creation that would finally reveal precisely who had attacked the youngest Weasley boy.

"Ah Severus," Dumbledore greeted him brightly as he walked in.

Severus wasn't fooled by the headmaster's genial appearance. The man was worried, and his eyes were the proof as they stared steadily at him, lacking in their customary twinkle.

"Do you have it?" Severus answered, ignoring the strange sight of the usually unflappable headmaster.

"Of course," Dumbledore answered smoothly, pulling the large sheet of parchment from a shelf behind him. He laid it out upon his now clean desk—another oddity—and set Merlin shaped paperweights down on each of the four corners.

"Now Severus, if you would," Dumbledore instructed with a wave of his hand to the parchment.

"You are sure you would rather me do this part?"

"The potion always reacts best to its maker, my boy," the man answered somberly.

"Hmph," was Severus' lackluster response.

Who better to blame the outcome of the test on than your ever faithful ex-Death Eater? Was Severus' unkind, but luckily unvoiced thought.

Carefully he removed the corked top of the vial, setting it in an inside pocket by itself. Next, he carefully tilted the vial and with the potion, he drew a circle at the top the page. From the circle, he drew the lines necessary to represent the very beginnings of a family tree. He did so in order to instruct the potion as to what kind of format it was to present itself in.

Severus straightened up from his precise design and instructed softly, "The trace evidence, if you would Albus."

Dumbledore stepped forwards with his own vial. His, unlike Severus', contained biological evidence from the night of the attack on Ronald Weasley. It had been preserved with a charm; one that ended as soon as the headmaster broke the seal at the top of the thin glass tube.

Severus tried not to breathe through his nose as the vial was upended in the space within the circle. He had no desire to breathe in the scent of the man who had raped one of his own students.

His task done, Dumbledore stepped away from the desk and closed the vial with a negligent flick of his fingers.

Severus took out his wand and pointed it at the strange design laid out before him, intoning the instructions in a deep voice, "Revelios familius." He did so without preamble, believing that the wait had already been long enough.

Severus and Albus peered towards the parchment and watched in interest as the lines converged together, swirling in a fine pattern of green and blue shades, before finally binding together in a display of dark purple.

Within the circle, there was now a name that read, "Ronald Bilius Weasley." Extending downwards was a generational line leading to two more names. On the right was the mother, Molly Weasley and on the left was the father.

There was a sharp gasp beside him as Dumbledore read the name listed there. For his part, Severus did not give any sign of outward amazement at the strange discovery listed before him, but he certainly felt it.

After all, he certainly had not expected to see "Rodney Weasley" listed in the spot where Arthur's name should have been.

In his peripheral, Severus heard more than saw Dumbledore collapse into one of the many squashy armchairs that were littered throughout the confines of his office. The silence between them was finally broken after Severus took a seat of his own.

"Well, at least Arthur is innocent," he finally said quietly to his employer.

A pause, and then, Albus finally answered in a near whisper, "Yes. Arthur is innocent."

. . .

Percy barely looked up when they dragged his brother into his cell. The other boy was barely conscious; his eyes dull and glazed as the aurors tossed him on the cot across from Percy's own.

He didn't say anything to greet his brother. He doubted that Ron would respond anyway, considering his state. Idly, he wondered what they had done to his younger sibling to cause such a harsh change in behavior.

The aurors left then, the iron door shutting with a CLANK that made him shudder despite himself. At least there were no Dementors in their Ministry cell.

Percy sunk down and put his face back in his hands, which is how he had been before his brother's not-so-surprising entrance.

For the next few hours, he dutifully ignored the cell's other occupant. He was used to tuning things out, especially unpleasant reality. However, eventually the silence of his brother got to him and he tentatively began trying to get Ron to respond to him.

After another hour of that, Percy unknowingly made the mistake that sealed his fate then and there. He crossed the cell and touched his brother's shoulder, with the intent of shaking him into some kind of awareness.

He never had a chance.

The sludge, which had been briefly absorbed into Ronald Weasley's body chose that moment to expel itself into the room, covering every surface with its deadly touch.

Down the hall, the aurors on duty suddenly snapped to attention as they heard the sharp shriek of terror rip its way through the stark

stone hallway. By the time they made it to the Weasley brothers' cell, it was too late.

Both boys were dead and the sludge was nowhere to be found.

. . .

"Rodney Weasley!" The aurors yelled, pounding on the man's sturdy oak door.

No answer.

Kingsley gave the command and they were soon quickly past the wards and into the house.

It wasn't until they got to the main bedroom that they discovered the man whom they had been charged with arresting.

"Shacklebolt!" One of the younger men called out. "I think you'd better see this."

Kingsley walked gingerly into the bedroom, the other aurors parting before him to reveal a body laying face down beside a pool of vomit. He could tell the man was already dead, but he ran the scan anyway, just for the sake of the report he had to file.

He had seen plenty of dead bodies during his work as an auror, but he couldn't help noticing that Rodney Weasley's had a particularly miserable look to it.

"Pack him up," he instructed, turning towards the man who had called him in there.

"Um sir, that's not all," the younger man replied nervously, pointing uneasily at the bed.

Kingsley turned to look where he was pointing and raised an eyebrow at the oddity before him.

The bed, although made, seemed to be rumpled, but considering Rodney Weasley was a long time bachelor, that wasn't too much of a surprise. However, there were also burnt silhouettes on the top

cover of what looked like an adult with two smaller child sized shapes surrounding it.

Later, they would discover that the darkened silhouettes were burnt all the way down into the mattress itself, and even more peculiar was the fact that they could not be removed, magical means or otherwise.

. . .

Weasley, Weasley, Who's Got a Weasley?

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive!" Sir Walter Scott

After what was likely a very stressful time for him, Arthur Weasley has now been released from Ministry custody. He was arrested earlier this week in suspicion regarding the attack of his son Ronald Weasley.

This morning, thanks to the hardworking efforts of Albus Dumbledore and an unnamed professor, the aurors received new evidence regarding the case, and in turn were able to release Mr. Weasley to his family.

The details of this situation would have likely never been connected if not for this reporter's unstinting dedication to uncovering the truth. After much digging, it was discovered that Perly Weasley was not merely taken in for questioning; rather, he was charged with the assault of a minor female! He is currently awaiting trial in the holding cells of the Ministry, and is unavailable for further questioning.

As for the attack on Arthur Weasley's son, who is to say that is all that happened?

Disturbing reports are beginning to trickle out of Hogwarts regarding this boy's

behavior around the female portion of the student population there. Thus far, this reporter has heard not one, but TWO thus far unsubstantiated allegations of inappropriate behaviors regarding this boy. Likely the aurors will soon be investigating those as well!

How far from the tree have these boy truly fallen? Who is to blame for the heinous actions of these two youngest Weasley? I know you want to know.

Should we blame Arthur Weasley for the faults of his two youngest sons?

As it turns out, there is no reason to blame him at all. The recent evidence discovered at Hogwarts has revealed a shocking truth: Arthur Weasley wasn't the father of Perly or Romald Weasley at all!

Fingers are now being pointed towards one Rodney Weasley, Arthur's older brother. Aurors have been dispatched to bring him into the Ministry, and this reporter hopes that he is able to explain how things came to be such a mangled mess!

Rita Skeeter, reporting.

Chapter 27 – It'll Be Okay

Hermione looked up in surprise at the knock on her door. Pomfrey had been screening all of her visitors; so it wasn't as if someone dangerous was waiting on the other side of the door.

"Come in," she called out softly.

It was Ginny, Neville and—and Harry?

Surprisingly, it was Neville who broke the silence first. "We heard that you were going to be released soon," the boy said tiredly.

Hermione looked at him carefully and was surprised to see dark smudges present under his eyes; as if he had long been fighting some kind of unknown, internal demon.

Slipping from her bed, she laid her book down behind her and stepped closer to her visitors.

"What happened, Neville?" She asked, laying her hand on his shoulder lightly.

"You know, the usual," he grinned. "Classes, Quidditch, nightmare causing slime—all the regular stuff."

Beside him, Ginny burst into hysterical giggles, and she watched silently as Harry drew her into his arms; letting her gasp out her feelings against him.

"Slime?" Was her incredulous question.

"Yeah," Neville snorted softly. "Goo. Sludge."

She stared back in silent mortification.

"Liquid crud?" Harry offered in a soft voice. "Dad and I think it's the same stuff I was cleaning up in my detentions earlier this term."

"Dad?" Hermione squeaked in surprise.

"Oh yeah," Harry answered with a slight grin. "Didn't anyone tell you? Snape adopted me."

. . .

"Dad?" Harry asked, sitting on the edge of Severus' bed in his darkened bedroom.

"How did it go?" Was the wearied response he got. In order to brew the Revelios Familias and teach all of his classes, Severus had pushed himself to the limit and now he was paying the price. Madam Pomfrey had ordered him to bed for no less than three consecutive days, and had put Harry in charge of making sure it actually happened.

That, and she had threatened them both with unpleasant sorts of bodily harm if they disobeyed.

"I talked to Ginny and Neville and then we went and talked to Hermione."

"Did you tell her about—?"

"I may have referred to you as 'Dad' once or twice," Harry said with a grin.

A muffled snort was his answer.

"Dad?" Harry asked, sliding under the warm covers with Severus, his socked feet pressing against the man's shins as he curled up against his adopted father.

"Harry?" Severus murmured in slight surprise at the boy's unusual display of tactile neediness. He wrapped long arms around the teen's narrow frame. It was amazing what just a few months of regular food intake could do for the body of a growing boy. True, Harry was still skinny, but he was no longer gaunt. He no longer seemed broken and lost.

"Ginny kissed me after we left Hermione's room," Harry confessed in a low, yet troubled voice.

"And this is not a good thing?" Severus answered carefully.

Harry huffed softly, "It was just like kissing Cho. I didn't . . . I didn't feel anything at all. Aren't you supposed to feel something when you get kissed?"

"Only if the person means something to you, Harry."

"Well, that's the thing though," Harry said, pausing as he pulled Severus' arms more securely around himself. "She means a lot to me—more than any other girl, really, but all I could think was, 'Gee, that's wet.'"

Severus congratulated himself silently on not snorting aloud; instead keeping his silence as he thought about what his son had said.

"It's . . . possible that you simply have not found the right girl yet," he said at last.

"Or?" Harry prompted, hearing something else in Severus' words.

"Or, you may simply not prefer the company of women." Severus admitted softly. "You may be, in a word, 'gay.'"

"I've thought about it before," Harry answered in just as quiet a voice.

"Being gay?"

"Yeah," Harry whispered. "I mean, I thought after, well you know with my Uncle and all?" He didn't have to finish his thought; Severus could feel the trembling of his limbs from where they were pressed against him.

"Go on," Severus prompted after pressing a light kiss to the top of his head.

"But you said that love, that sex," the word was whispered hoarsely. "You said that it wasn't about force or taking. You said it was mutual care between two people, right?"

Severus smiled a bit in the dark. Harry had just summed up the point of more than a dozen short conversations they had participated in since the beginning of their familial relationship.

"Correct."

"So if—if I were to like boys instead of girls—."

"Or both," Severus amended.

"Yeah," Harry grinned. "Well, I wouldn't have to like someone like Vernon, right? Does this make any sense?"

"I would hope that you wouldn't be drawn back to someone like Vernon," Severus answered with just a touch of growl in his voice.

"But, it'd be okay to like a guy, even though it was a guy that, that hurt me?"

Severus shifted in his bed, sitting up with his back against the headboard and gathered the boy back to his chest once more. "Such a thing would be acceptable," he answered, letting the warmth in his voice speak louder than his words.

"So you wouldn't freak out if I thought I was gay?" Harry squeaked, not quite daring to look him in the eye, even after dragging them both through such a long and awkward conversation.

Severus merely shook his head. "Harry, I promised to love you forever when I agreed to be your father. So no, the idea of you loving someone else does not bother me."

"Even if that someone else is a guy?"

"Even if that someone else is a Hufflepuff!" Severus retorted with a bark of laughter.

"What if they're both?" The boy teased.

"As long as they treat you acceptably—and appropriately, I will approve," Severus' eyes were warm and Harry let out a visible breath of relief at the sight.

"I might not be gay, you know," the boy added after some comfortable silence had passed.

"Or you might be after all. It doesn't matter. Either way, you're my son."

Severus could tell that his had been the correct response by the way Harry seemed to melt backwards into him.

"Thanks, Dad."

. . .

Arthur Weasley sat slumped over the table in his kitchen, all of the week's Daily Prophets spread out in front of him. In the other room sat Molly in an armchair; a number of photo albums both in her lap and also on the floor around her. Wizarding pictures of smiling redheads stared up at her, and she smiled back wanly as she looked through each page.

Kingsley had discovered a supply of what turned out to be Arthur's hair at Rodney's house, along with a plentiful supply of polyjuice. It seemed that Rodney had been faking his way into Arthur's bed for years, and yet somehow neither he nor Molly had ever known.

He had known for years that Rodney was . . . unusual, but he had never thought him capable of all that had been discovered thus far. Upon learning that Percy and Ron were really just his nephews, Arthur had expected to feel relief, but instead his grief had only grown. Rodney had stolen so much from him, from them. His mind was still reeling from the complications of the situation, and there was still more being discovered every day.

A knock on the door shattered the uncomfortable silence in the house. Arthur waited a moment to see if the sound had jarred Molly from her grieving, but he heard nothing from that side of the room. The knock sounded again and he found himself stumbling to his feet, moving upon limbs that no longer seemed to work right; bones that no longer seemed to know how to hold him up.

He hobbled to the front door and then without looking, he pulled it open and goggled at the two people who were solemnly waiting there.

"Might we come in?" Severus asked, stepping inside and pulling Harry behind him before he could process their existence.

With a wave of his wand, Snape started tea and started unshrinking a number of small packages from inside his dark robes.

Always black, Arthur's short circuiting mind thought as he watched Severus in motion. Is it because he grieves constantly as well?

"Mr. Weasley, why don't take a seat?" Harry asked, maneuvering him easily back into his recently vacated seat.

He watched in befuddlement as the boy quickly cleaned the table off, removing the many newspapers that had accumulated there over the past endless week. Around them, Severus was moving like a whirling dervish through the Weasley kitchen; washing the dishes, clearing the counters, finding the teakettle and boiling the water for the tea that was slowly appearing before him.

Harry was opening the packages in front of him, keeping a running commentary on what it was they had brought. There were little pink cakes, a wide assortment of scones, chocolate digestibles, peppermint sticks, small dainty sandwiches and more. At one point in the madness, he looked up and realized that one of the two had managed to get Molly in there as well, and although she still wouldn't look at him, it did give him some comfort to have her beside him.

Abruptly the hubbub ceased, and Arthur looked down to see a cup of steaming tea sitting on the table in front of him, fixed just the way he liked. His forehead creased as he tried to remember if he had done it, but just then he felt Harry's hand alight on his arm.

"I've watched you enough times to know how you like it, sir. I hope it's okay?" Harry peered down to watch as he took a careful sip.

"It's lovely, my boy. Just perfect," he answered tremulously, just above a whisper.

The smile that Harry bestowed on him was wide and beaming, and irrationally he felt a tiny sense comfort at seeing it. He could see Molly watching them from across the table, but he knew it was too soon to say anything to her.

"You should have known it wasn't me!" He remembered yelling the last time they had spoken.

His cheeks glowed at the recollection, and he bowed his head over his tea to hide his face from his wife. Rodney had only come to her for sex. Was it possible that their relationship was so bland that someone could impersonate him just like that?

"Arthur?"

He looked up, blinking away his tears, and stared into Severus' face. The man was now seated beside him, and as he looked around surreptitiously, he saw that Harry was now beside Molly.

"Why are you here?" He whispered. He watched in surprise as the man shifted and actually squirmed in discomfort from his question.

"You have always claimed Harry as part of your brood, yes?" Severus pointed out and then forged ahead quickly before Arthur could argue the sensibility of such a thing now. "Since I adopted him as my son earlier this term, I suppose that . . ." Severus shifted once more, setting his mouth in something close to a grimace. "I suppose that this makes us family."

"Surely you must be joking!" Molly spat out in response. Unknowingly, Arthur was nodding along with her.

"I can understand why you wouldn't want to have yourselves aligned with a former Death Eater . . ." Severus began, only to be cut off by another outburst from Molly.

"If you are only here to poke fun at this household, then I must insist that you leave immediately!" Molly screeched, rising unsteadily to her feet. At her side, Harry rose too, catching her arm when she began to sway dangerously.

"It was my idea that we came here today!" Harry cried out, practically forcing Molly to sit down and then adding something that looked suspiciously like a sticking charm to her backside. "You're my family," he added, wide green eyes blinking back at them both imploringly. "And family should stick together. Especially now," he added in a shaky voice.

. . .

After making it back to Hogwarts' Infirmary, Colin Creevey had been moved to the memory damaged ward at St. Mungo's. Dennis had continued to visit him since then, trying desperately to get his brother to remember something-anything-about his former existence.

Although Colin now could call him by name, it was only by the value of enforced repetition that allowed him to do so. Weeks had gone by, and the best response that Dennis had gotten from his brother was the occasional flicker of remembrance that sometimes lit Colin's eyes when they were talking.

At times, Colin was severely depressed, and the healers had assured him and Professor McGonagall-who had accompanied Dennis on every visit thus far-that such a thing was perfectly normal in amnesiac patients. Unfortunately, that day was one of those bad days, and after a few minutes of talking and getting no response, Dennis sighed in defeat and got up to leave.

Just as he was about to close the door behind him, Colin called out to him. "Den'?"

Dennis froze in his tracks. Colin had only called him 'Dennis' since losing his memory.

Cautiously he turned and looked across the room to where his brother was still seated at his writing desk. "Yeah Col'?" He asked hoarsely.

There were tears in Colin's eyes, and wet tracks on his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Den. Oh god, I'm so sorry," Colin cried out, looking horribly young and vulnerable in his hospital issued pyjamas.

Dennis took a step back into the room and closed the door once more. "For what, Col'?" He prompted, not yet ready to completely hope that his brother was back in his right mind.

"For not telling you why we ran; for not talking to you when I needed you. I'm sorry," Colin cried as he talked, and Dennis hesitantly took another step forwards. "But mostly I'm sorry that I tried to attack you, that-that I tried to d-d-do," he stuttered, slumping in on himself in the process. "That I almost became Ron, that I almost hurt you," he gasped out, tilting forwards bonelessly in his anguish.

"Why Colin? Why did you do that?" Dennis stood only a few feet from his brother, fists clenched at his sides; blinking furiously as he tried to keep his tears at bay for just a little longer.

"I had to keep you safe," Colin was bawling now, arms wrapped around his middle, his voice muffled from his head being slumped against his chest. "Mum told me to keep you safe. Mum told me, and I couldn't any other way and I just wanted to protect you."

A knock on the door and Dennis pivoted around to see his head of house staring worriedly down at them both. "Are you boys okay?" McGonagall asked him.

Dennis felt his head nodding, as though something else were controlling his body and he was just a passive observer floating above it all.

"If you're sure . . ."

Abruptly his consciousness reasserted itself back in his mind, and he smiled bravely back at the older woman. "Yeah, I think we're getting there," he answered softly, licking his lips and realizing for the first time that they were trembling.

"I'm just outside if you need me."

"Thank you," Dennis answered, glad when the door closed again. Despite only being thirteen, he felt a thousand years old just then. Carefully he stumbled over to one of the free chairs next to his still weeping brother.

"Okay," Dennis nodded to himself, reaching out a tentative arm and grabbing his brother by the shoulders in a one-armed hug. "It's gonna be okay," he whispered again. He was no longer sure exactly whom he was trying to reassure with his words.

Epilogue

All in all, Graham Montague wasn't unhappy with the changes to the Slytherin Quidditch team that year. Sure, Crabbe and Goyle had been large and threatening, but they also had been dumb as posts and had the playing ingenuity of rocks.

Draco Malfoy, although a bit of a prat in previous years, had turned into somewhat of an okay guy and a brilliant Beater. He, unlike Crabbe and Goyle, understood the finesse of nearly hitting one's target, but not actually doing it (and thus having to suffer through the annoyance of a foul). Near misses were far more terrifying for everyone involved, and they kept the game moving a lot smoother, at least for their side.

Millicent Bulstrode was taking the other spot, and quite honestly, he had never seen a more formidable player. She was absolutely vicious in her attack and was ridiculously strong—and not just for a girl either!

Ralph Harper was their youngest player. They had planned to make him a reserve player the previous year, but the Triwizard Tournament had superseded those plans. Now he had his own spot as the team's third Chaser. The kid had wicked sharp eyes and although smaller than many of them, he was just as tough as any of them.

Harry Evans-Snape was his other newest player, and although Graham would have never in a million years thought he would change sides, here he was regardless. He didn't know all of the details for why Harry was now a Slytherin, but considering how smoothly he had made the transition—at least within their house itself—Graham had to wonder if the boy shouldn't have been there all along. That Gryffindor persona he had worn in the previous years was obviously an act. Harry Evans-Snape was a Slytherin through and through.

Anyone with half a brain could see that, really.

The first Slytherin match of the year was Gryffindor against Slytherin. It almost always was like that, except for that one year where Draco had been "injured" by that hippogriff. He liked Draco now, but if one

of his little brothers ever tried something like that, he'd smack the snot out of them for it.

His brother Anthony was already at Hogwarts, having been sorted into Slytherin the year before. He was secretly grooming him to take his place on the team after he graduated at the end of the year. The kid was a good chaser and wasn't half-stupid either. Graham just hoped that he'd keep himself out of trouble without the threat of his big brother hanging over his head.

. . .

The next day dawned bright and clear; absolutely perfect Quidditch conditions. It was cold, but not too bad, with a light breeze that would keep anyone from getting too warm.

In the Slytherin locker room, the team was gathered together listening as their captain, Graham Montague, went over the final details.

Harry, like his teammates, was bedecked in green and silver, and he was still getting used to the look. A part of him desperately wanted to show those Gryffindorks exactly what they had chosen to give up by turning against him so completely. On the other hand, another part of him was afraid by what they would say when they saw him playing against them. They had been pretty careful in their practices in order to keep him a secret, and from what he could tell, it had worked.

His presence was a calculated shocker to hopefully throw his old team off their game, if only a bit. It was a good idea, but Harry wasn't sure how well it would work.

Graham was a good captain and he was glad that he hadn't played on the team while Marcus Flint was still there. There were only three holdovers from the old team; Montague was one of them, playing Chaser; Adrian Pucey was another, also a Chaser; and Miles Bletchley was the third, playing the Keeper spot. They were all three seventh years though, so if Harry were to keep playing for the next two years after this, he could do so on his own terms.

As it was though, Pucey made him nervous, and he and Bletchley simply had nothing in common, and therefore never interacted much

beyond practices. Graham was an okay bloke though. He just hadn't ever talked to him before now, and didn't know much about him.

According to Draco and Blaise, Graham's old man had been attacked and crippled by Death Eaters way back during the first dark war for refusing to commit to their side. The Montague family, minus a few sympathizers, were largely neutral, much like Blaise's was.

"It's tough, because even if you're with other neutral families, you never can be sure that they aren't going turn against you. Light families stick together and Dark ones do too, but we neutral ones, we just have to go on by ourselves," was what Blaise had told him.

. . .

"I know in past years our motto has been 'Get It Done by Any Means Possible,'" Graham said, his foot on a bench as he leaned over and glared at each of them in turn. "But we're better than that. We can win and be smart about it too. When anything goes, we get sloppy and we let things happen that ought not to. We're a good team, and we can win this by using every bit of our slyness and creativity to get around obstacles that the other houses don't even see." He paused and glanced around once more with a slightly softer expression.

"Let's show 'em who's better," he said with a grin as he stood up.

Adrian whooped and grabbed his broomstick. "Let's do this already!"

"Remember, only Hufflepuffs run into things for no reason!" Graham shouted as they started for the door.

"Yeah, so bump into people for a reason!" Draco shouted back, a wide grin splitting his face.

"Nobody better bump into me!" Millicent grumbled, looking darkly at them all as she went past.

Personally, Graham was looking forwards to seeing what happened when someone tried. It was bound to be exciting.

As they left the room, he noticed that Harry was lagging behind the others, so he slowed his steps and waited to see if he'd have a chance to talk to the boy.

"You okay?" He ventured when they were alone.

"Yeah," Harry answered, scrubbing a hand across his face agitatedly. "Just thinkin' about who's not gonna be there," he shrugged, looking away in embarrassment.

"Snape's gonna be there though, right?" Graham said with a pained grin. His own dad had never been to any of his games, even though he had promised every year that he'd show up at least once.

"Yeah," Harry said, with a small smile. "He's sitting with Blaise and the other fifth years instead of being with the other professors."

"Well just focus on him then, you know? You never had any family show up before, right?" He didn't wait for an answer. "So play this game for your dad." He thumped Harry on the shoulder once and then nodded towards the door. "They might start this game without me, but not without you. Come on."

. . .

"Captains, shake hands!" Hooch yelled out in a magically enhanced voice.

Angelina Johnson and Graham Montague stepped forwards and gripped each other's hand. They didn't shake, but neither did they look as though they were trying to break the other's fingers from the force of their grips. They let go after a moment and went back to their respective groups.

"And Slytherin wins the coin toss!" Lee Johnson announced.

The game had begun.

Harry took to the air with the rest of the players and looked to see who had taken his spot on the Gryffindor team.

He spotted Fred and George Weasley immediately; in fact it looked as though most of the previous year's team was in the air with him. Angelina, Alicia, and Katie were all three Chasers still, and with the twins still on as Beaters that meant that there were only two new players.

"Hey Harry!" A familiar voice came from behind him and he whirled in the air to face its speaker.

"Ginny! You're Gryffindor's new Seeker?"

"Yup! Finally going to show those boys that I can play just as well as them!"

She sounded like her old self, but Harry knew better. Her eyes were tired and a little bloodshot. She wasn't good, but at least she was finally safe. They both were.

"Wait 'til you see what our team is like this year!" Ginny shouted out, flying around him.

"I dunno Ginny," he answered with a secretive grin. "You haven't seen what we can do yet."

"Well, may the best team win, in that case!" Ginny shouted with another boisterous grin.

"Hey, who's that girl playing Keeper?"

"Demelza Robins. She's only a 2nd year, can you believe it? She's good though!" Ginny told him before flying off in a different direction.

"And Slytherin has the quaffle!" Lee Jordan's voice broke into his consciousness. "Ralph Harper is in possession. This is his first year on the team and—Wow that was close!"

George had hit a bludger into Ralph's path, nearly knocking him off his broom, but the smaller boy had swung himself to the side and missed it with only inches to spare.

"And Harper passes it to Pucey, back to Harper, back to Pucey! Gryffindor's Chasers are hot in pursuit!"

Suddenly Alicia Spinnet came up beside Harper and threw her weight into his side, trying to make him lose his grip of the red quaffle he was carrying so possessively under his arm.

"Hey little boy! Don't you think you're a little young for Quidditch?" She taunted him as Katie Bell dropped in on his other side, effectively blocking him in.

Harper steadfastly ignored the much older girls and then abruptly changed angles and started flying upwards towards the sun. Unsurprisingly, they followed him, barely aware that he was doing his bit in a predetermined game plan.

His flight upwards was actually a very carefully angled ascent still in the direction of the goal posts.

Under him, Montague was diving and weaving through the Weasley twins as he headed for the goal posts at a much lower level. Pucey was already there, flying circles around Demelza Robins and calling out taunts as he flew through and around her airspace.

"Hey little lion! How do you expect to cover all three of these hoops on your own? Maybe you should just go home to McGonagall, eh?"

Every time she tried to fly up and away from him, he followed her, staying just far enough back that he couldn't be fouled for harassment.

Meanwhile, higher in the air, Harper was still hemmed in by two Gryffindor Chasers and Angelina Johnson was flying up under him.

"It looks like the Gryffindor Chasers are attempting Parkin's Pincer*!" Lee announced.

However, Harper turned the tables on them when he abruptly did a backwards loop, and threw the quaffle downwards towards Montague.

"And Slytherin scores! 10 – 0, Slytherin! Now Gryffindor has the ball! Let's see if we can't keep it out of the grip of those slimy snakes, eh girls!"

"Lee!" McGonagall's voice came over the magical speaker in admonishment.

Above them, Harry was having no luck finding the Snitch as of yet, but he was having an interesting time watching his team outplay his old one.

Millicent's aim was deadly. She had hit the bludger near each and every Gryffindor player, and had bodily clipped the tails of both Spinnet and Bell twice. Draco was just as skilled, but while his fellow beater seemed content to equally pound the Gryffindor team, he directed his strikes more toward their Beaters and for some reason, Angelina Johnson.

Idly, Harry wondered if he had heard about how she had turned on him earlier that year. At any rate, it was keeping her away from the quaffle and keeping them all a little more off balance.

...

Severus watched the action overhead with thinly disguised unease. He had always been a bit discomforted—worried—whenever there were any particularly vicious plays being made, but it was different when the boy he called "son" was up there as well.

"And Bletchley catches the quaffle! The score is still 10 – 0, Slytherin!" Lee Jordan's voice rang out over their heads.

"Don't worry so much," Blaise abruptly said, bumping shoulders with him.

"Me? Worry?" Severus sniffed in disdain.

"Yeah, I know you, sir," Blaise added with a laugh. "Harry's doing great. They've only sent three bludgers his way and he's outflown each of them with feet to spare."

"So far," Severus grumbled in a voice soft enough for only Blaise to hear.

"And we haven't even been fouled yet," Blaise continued on with a knowing smile.

"Don't jinx us Blaise!" Pansy growled, her eyes riveted on her girlfriend, Millicent.

A great shout went up into the air and suddenly Harry and Ginny were both flying towards the small flash of gold that was fluttering around the base of the Gryffindor's centre goal post. Severus sucked in a breath as his son flew around stray bludgers, a swinging bat and three Gryffindor players. He fought the urge to shout at them to get out of the way of his son. At the last moment, the Snitch shot off across the pitch, skimming the top of the grass as it flew towards the spectator stands.

"Well, at least if they fall now, they don't have far to go," Blaise remarked brightly from beside him.

"Shut. UP." He gritted out, standing up in time to see the Snitch go straight up the side of the stands.

Below them a crashing sound occurred and then a second later Harry shot up past them without Ginny.

Severus gasped out another breath as his son threw himself backwards as the Snitch abruptly changed directions again, heading back up across the pitch into the middle of the action itself.

Two minutes later, a slightly more mussed Ginny Weasley shot up from the ground as well, a very noticeable shiner blossoming across her face. Feeling guilty, Severus let out a sigh of relief that it was not Harry who had been injured.

. . .

Above the two racing Seekers, the rest of the players continued on with the game. The score had increased to 50-20, Slytherin, and the Gryffindor players were starting to become more vicious in their attacks.

Pucey was no longer badgering the Gryffindor Keeper, but Draco had included the goal posts as part of his collection of targets. He would have aimed directly at Robins herself, but Hooch seemed to regard that as grounds for a foul, so he didn't. Montague had insisted on their playing a technically clean game and he was trying to stick to that.

Every time he shot a bludger through the goal post, it would ricochet itself around the posts, causing Robins to dive for cover, opening up

the hoops for scoring. Unfortunately, as soon as George and Fred caught onto what he was doing, they began doing the same thing to the Slytherin Keeper as well, making the relatively new strategy more or less moot.

In the middle of the pitch, the three Gryffindor Chasers were attempting Hawkshead Attacking Formation** with Katie in the front with the quaffle, the other two flanking her as they flew down the field at full speed.

However, coming from the exact opposite direction were all three Slytherin Chasers, doing exactly the same thing; essentially turning the pitch into a game of Chicken. The only question between the two sides was who would be the first to bail?

The closer they got to one another, the more determined the look on each of their faces became. In addition, Pucey and Montague were both whooping dementedly beside Harper, who was flying in the midst of them.

At the last possible second, both Angelina and Alicia changed directions. In the middle of the Slytherins, Harper seemed to be changing position, and as the spectators looked closer, they could see that both Pucey and Montague had a hold on his broom, one hand at the back and one at the front, respectively speaking.

Then, as Katie barreled on through them, Harper, who was now crouched on top of his broom, leapt up into the air and tackled her, sending them both into a downwards tailspin.

"And Harper is without a broom!" Lee Jordan's excited voice shot out over the crowd. "This certainly is an interesting twist on the Blitzen Ballet*** tactic!"

"What the hell are you doing!" Katie shrieked at Harper as they plummeted quickly to the ground.

"Winning!" He told her gleefully as he easily plucked the quaffle from her arms and jumped off the back of the broom.

Just under and slightly behind them waited Montague with Harper's broom, and as the boy fell, Montague flew by and snagged him.

"Montague has the quaffle!"

Harper was now riding on Montague's broom, seated just in front of him; his own broom in his hands as they flew for the Gryffindor goal posts.

Without warning, a flash of gold flew across their path, followed closely by Harry and Ginny. Montague didn't have a chance to watch, but he heard the crunch as Harry purposely flew into the broom tail of one of the Gryffindor Chasers who had been about to plough into them from the side. He smirked at the sound and then urged his broom forwards and faster than before.

A bludger came rocketing into their direction and Montague swore and then pulled them into a steep incline.

"Damn good thing you're so small, kid!" He growled as his broom reacted sluggishly to his commands.

Ralph wasn't particularly underweight, not like Harry was, but he wasn't a monster goon like Crabbe or Goyle either.

. . .

On the other side of the field, Harry was racing after the Snitch with Ginny just on his heels. They chased it around the Slytherin goal posts, flying through the loops themselves as Bletchley wisely made himself scarce. And then they followed it down again and across the field. Fred or George seemed intent on focusing all of their bludgers at him and he was constantly buffeting from side to side as he attempted to avoid the lethal little buggers.

He wasn't offended by their actions, but it did mean he had to keep his eyes open and all of his senses on in order not to wind up squashed like a bug under the stands.

Ginny was creeping up beside him; bumping him and making his broom wobble unpleasantly. Naturally, he reciprocated the action, bumping back a little harder and causing her to curse aloud.

"Is that any way for a lady to speak?" He asked with a laugh.

"Just wait and see what this lady can do, you smarmy ponce!" She retorted.

. . .

Demelza Robins flew back and forth desperately trying to determine what the Slytherin chasers were up to this time. In all of her practices with the Gryffindor team, never had she known of such tactics as these! She was amazed at the sheer daring of the players, let alone the insanity of the things they were attempting!

George and Fred Weasley had assured her that the Slytherins were nothing more than "big, bullying cheaters," but from her position on the field, that wasn't the truth at all!

As Montague got them closer to the goal hoops, he very carefully passed the quaffle to Harper and then carefully scooted himself backwards on his broom in order to avoid being overbalanced. As soon as they were within a good distance, he watched as Harper threw the quaffle up a little ways and swing back with his broom, essentially turning it into a bat. They had reinforced his broom with spells and binding agents to ensure that it wouldn't break during this manoeuvre, and as Ralph swung it forwards into the bright red ball, Montague prayed that they would hold.

Harper hit the ball with the bristle end of his broom, a bit like a Lacrosse player might do. The force of the strike made the quaffle whistle as it whooshed past and straight into the far right of the three goals.

"And Slytherin scores again!"

. . .

Harry and Ginny were now under the stands themselves, following the Snitch as it whisked around barriers and supports just as easily as a fish through water. More than once they'd been forced to split directions thanks to a lack of space, but at least there weren't any bludgers present.

They finally popped out the side, back into the light of the day. Harry was closer to the snitch than they'd been all game, and he risked a brief glance at the scoreboard; 80-30, Slytherin.

It'd be a good time to win, he thought with a smirk, leaning into his broom and urging every last bit of speed out of his Firebolt.

Distantly he felt Ginny fall back a bit as he followed the snitch back up into the midst of the game. He dodged a bludger, ducking under it close enough to hear it whistle past his ear. The sun was beating hot on his neck and he could see the snitch shining brightly in its rays.

"Come on, come on!" He muttered, reaching forwards and arching his back to reach the farthest he could. As he flew, he could feel the concerns of the term and the summer just fall away. Abruptly, an image of Snape, of his father, he corrected himself, appeared in his mind and he grinned at the thought.

Snape would likely verbally berate him for putting himself in danger during this game, and although it was a bit strange to think, he really couldn't wait for the chance to endure that pent up worry from his father.

The tips of his fingers brushed the wings once, and he stretched, feeling sure that the extra inch he had put on from living with someone who cared about him was going to make the difference. Sure enough, a moment later, his fingers clamped down on the tiny winged ball and he swung himself upwards triumphantly into the light.

"Harry's caught the Snitch!" Lee's voice broke forwards into his thoughts, and suddenly he was aware of the cheers of the crowd around him, including his own teammates.

The grin that took over his face nearly hurt with its intensity, but he held onto it regardless. He had done it. No more being stuck as Potter or Boy! He was Harry. Harry Evans-Snape.

"Dad!" He shouted at the crowd, laughing freely as he did. "Did you see! Did you see! We won!"

He had survived and was breaking forwards into a life and world of his own.

THE END THE END THE END THE END THE END THE END THE
END THE END THE END THE END THE END

*Parkin's Pincer is a Quidditch tactic named after the original Wigtown Wanderers, who were believed to have invented it. During the move, two Chasers close in on an opposing Chaser, hemming them in. The third Chaser then flies directly at the trapped Chaser.

**The Hawkshead Attacking Formation is a Quidditch tactic invented by Darren O'Hare. The team's Chasers fly together in an arrowhead towards the opposition goalposts. The tactic intimidates the opposition, and is effective at forcing players to move aside to allow a scoring opportunity.

***Blitzen Ballet is a move that involves all three Chasers and, if done correctly, secures ten points for the team. First, the Chasers pass the Quaffle to each other, and then one of the Chasers jumps onto another Chaser's broom. This confuses the Keeper, enabling one of the Chasers to score.

A/N – Okay, after I take a break, I'm going to go back and do some editing . . . probably of the Colin and Dennis variety and Blaise and Harry too. :) But yes. This is the end. I could have continued on forever . . . or stopped like I did. So. There you have it.